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AESCHYLUS, EURIPIDES AND EUGENE O'NEILL'S MOURNING BECOMES ELECTRA

by

© TERRI JURGENS JACKSON

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH

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The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research, for acceptance, a thesis entitled

AESCHYLUS, EURIPIDES AND EUGENE O'NEILL'S MOURNING BECOMES ELECTRA

submitted by Terri Jo Jurgens Jackson in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

M. W. Mack
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Date January 8th, 1974

To Professor Margery MacKenzie, whose initial enthusiasm and continuing patience sustained me through discouragements and procrastinations.

ABSTRACT

Despite almost unanimous scholarly agreement on Aeschylus as Eugene O'Neill's model for his Mourning Becomes Electra, the comparisons which can be made between the modern work and the Oresteia are at best trivial. An examination of published biographical evidence reveals that O'Neill had undoubtedly read all of the ancient Electra dramas, and that claims for the sole influence of Aeschylus are not well founded. A casual reference to Aeschylus by O'Neill and his use of the trilogy form are the strongest arguments adduced for their similarity. Internal evidence suggests, moreover, that more substantive parallels, particularly in character and plot development, can be drawn with Euripides' use of the theme in his Electra. In each of the two works, the action is focused on the Electra-figure who is portrayed as austere and resolved; in each her motivations are more complex than those of the simple "avenging daughter" because of an uncommon attachment to her father; in both works her relationship with her mother is one of long-standing antagonism; each dramatist makes note of her hereditary ties with her father to the repudiation of those with her mother; in both the Orestes-figure is weak and vacillating; in both Electra is a participant in the matricide, and finally, expiation over time is the fate of the protagonists of both tragedies. A survey of the secondary literature establishes that most articles on O'Neill's sources uncritically accept Barrett Clark's early argument for the influence of Aeschylus. Those few which acknowledge the possibility of Euripides' influence are neither thorough nor related to the external evidence available. Recognition of the similarities between the works of Euripides and O'Neill necessitates acknowledgement that Greek drama ranges beyond the controlled tragedy of Sophocles and the realization that O'Neill's trilogy is a descendant of Greek drama in spirit as well as in theme.

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INTRODUCTION

> In this latest stage of the growth of our literature, we have turned again to listen to the legends. This is part of our deeper exploration of the human mind. Like a man who remembers a tale told him in his childhood and realizes that it has profound significance, we are now retelling the Greek myths, finding that they are often the only illumination of many dark places of the soul, and drawing from them a hundred meanings which are vital for ourselves.
>
> Gilbert Highet[1]

Surely no work of twentieth century American literature is more aptly described by Highet than Eugene O'Neill's Mourning Becomes Electra. Written by the artist who introduced American drama to the "dark places of the soul," the modern trilogy retells the myth of the House of Atreus, a myth which had inspired all three of Greece's greatest dramatists centuries before.

Precisely because O'Neill chose this vehicle for one of his "explorations of the human mind," modern critics have puzzled over its sources. Most have taken O'Neill at his word that the work is modeled on the Oresteia of Aeschylus. Those who admire O'Neill's work marvel at his accomplishment in transforming his archaic source into the strikingly modern work it is; those critics who for whatever reason dislike O'Neill, blame him for having violated the nobility of spirit in Aeschylus. Whether to praise or blame, almost all serious scholars of the modern play have compared Mourning Becomes Electra with the Oresteia.

Yet to anyone moderately familiar with Greek literature, another dramatist must surely come to mind for comparison. Fifth century Greece, too, had its O'Neill: a tragedian who was primarily interested in the psychology, the motivations of his characters, who persistently wrenched familiar myths from their safely traditional context and thrust them into the immediate experience of his audience, who dared to dramatize the chaos and terror of human existence in face of his contemporaries' affirmations of divine and social order. That man was Euripides.

This thesis will argue that O'Neill's work owes more of its essential features to Euripides' Electra, than to the Oresteia of Aeschylus. The first chapter places this study's methodology within the current controversy over the value of source and influence studies, and also deals with the methodological problem of the authority which should be given to a writer's own testimony about his sources.

Chapter two attempts to provide for the reader a background against which to judge the case which can be made for the influence of Aeschylus and that which can be made for Euripides. It attempts to bring together all published biographical material which sheds light on O'Neill's knowledge of ancient Greek, his readings in Greek literature, his acquaintance with intermediary works which may have modified his readings of the Electra myth, and the effect of friends and family members in the development of his conception of his material. So far as I have been able to discover, this basic research on external evidence of influence has never before been undertaken.

Chapter three examines the texts in question, comparing O'Neill's work with that of Euripides and with the trilogy of Aeschylus. Although the external evidence in chapter two is inconclusive in proving that one writer or the other served as O'Neill's primary source, I argue that comparison of structural aspects, motivation, character development and patterns of interrelationship all point to Euripides.

In chapter four, the critical literature on the question of O'Neill's source is examined with particular emphasis on the one strong argument made for Aeschylus, the one strong case made for Euripides, and the numerous articles which entirely dismiss Greek sources as having been significant.

The fifth and concluding chapter notes additional similarities between the attitude toward drama of O'Neill and of Euripides, and advances some explanations as to why these similarities have been overlooked by scholars and why some reject O'Neill's Mourning Becomes Electra as having been genuinely influenced by Greek tragedy.

FOOTNOTES : INTRODUCTION

[1] *The Classical Tradition: Greek and Roman Influence on Western Literature* (London: Oxford University Press, 1949), p. 546.

CHAPTER ONE: METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

For perhaps the last forty years, the concepts of source and influence have been, in Haskell Block's phrase, under "assault."[1] Ironically, the attacks against this method of scholarship have consisted of two basic indictments which are seemingly contradictory. On the one hand, those literary theorists who ally themselves with the ideology of the American "New Critics," reject the "vain study of sources and influences," preferring instead, "the definition of the poet's type through comparisons with other manifestations of the same type in other languages and traditions."[2] This represents a revolt against what is termed the "positivism" of nineteenth and early twentieth century scholarship, a rejection of the study of so-called "extrinsic" aspects of literature for the "intrinsic" aspects.

On the other hand, critics of source- and influence-study fault the method for not being positivistic enough, that is, for failing to distinguish true sources from simple "affinity" between two works:

> Enfin, il convient de distinguer des degrés differents, depuis l'imitation conscient jusqu'à l'inconsciente emersion de vers jadis lus et relus, en passant par l'emprunt d'un detail infime, et de ne pas attribuer systematiquement à une influence ce qui peux être simple rencontre, affinité . . .[3]

More telling still is the criticism of a theorist who opposes influence study: "The concept is obviously called upon to account for any relationship, running the gamut of incidence to causality, with a somewhat expansive range of intermediate correlations."[4] Thus, critics complain both that the concept is too restrictive in that it demands historical evidence of causality (and hence, studies extrinsic to the work), and that it is too open, in that it is used even when causality cannot be established.

The debate is not crucial to the methodology of this thesis. By the very fact of undertaking this research, I am affirming my confidence in the usefulness of source- and influence-study to comparative literature, and, as I will argue presently, am in good company in so doing. The debate is useful, however, in clarifying the philosophical difficulties with this kind of study, and enforcing on it more methodological rigour.

In the most provocative of the critical reexaminations of the concept, Claudio Guillén argues that it suffers from "la confusión entre estados de la mente y poesiá—que invalida tantos estudios de influencia."[5] He maintains that literature has two distinct realities: the literary (or creative) act and the literary product (or object). "Toda comparación de indole estetica entre textos literarios, considerados como objetos artisticos, es radicalmente distinta del estudio de genesis o de influencias."[6] While he acknowledges the value of some studies of the latter type, he proposes more intensive study of the former; the development of a synchronic study of literature modeled on the linguistic system of Saussure.

This confusion, I suggest, was perpetuated by literary scholars whose primary interest was in the synchronic study of literary objects. Before this effort had such outspoken defenders as Guillén and Hassan, such studies were acceptable to the scholarly community only insofar as they could be assimilated into the traditional diachronic framework of literary study. Thus, the concepts of "source" and "influence," originally tools of the literary historian, were inflated to give scholarly validity to studies which were increasingly ahistorical, the much maligned "affinity" studies.

With the recognition that textual comparisons are in their own right valuable to the study of literature, scholars will no longer need to disguise this kind of study as literary history, and, one hopes, the confusion of the two will no longer be so pervasive.

A certain degree of this confusion, however, will always be found in diachronic studies because of their very nature. In order to prove literary influence, biographical evidence will never suffice. So long as the focus of literary scholarship remains on the literary work (and not on biography for its own sake), evidence of any putative influence must be shown to exist in the work itself.

This point is well made by Block, who argues:

> The primary object of the study of influence should not be "rapports exterieurs" as has been too frequently the case, but "rapports interieurs," in which the movement of influence is not simply from writer to writer, but from work to work. External data may supplement and perhaps reinforce such relationships, and if so, should not be neglected, but of primary importance is the aesthetic interaction in which influence plays a vital and intrinsic role. . . . this concept rightly used, can provide insight into the aesthetic character of individual works and at the same time, clarify and define their historical relationship.[7]

A simple glance at the number of pages this thesis devotes to the internal and external evidence will reveal that the higher priority has been assigned to examining the literary product than its genesis. But I have chosen to conduct this research as a traditional source study for two reasons. First, the question has a biographical dimension which cannot lightly be overlooked. The resemblances between O'Neill's work and those of the Greek dramatists are clearly not accidental. Whatever the result, and admittedly the study of

O'Neill's biography sheds little light on the question, there is value in establishing as accurately as possible the "historical relationship" among these works. As A. O. Aldridge remarks, "even these opponents of influence studies justify the examination of major literary works in order to ascertain the elements which are traditional and those which are unique qualities. . . . that it tells us something concerning the creative process is undeniable."[8]

But I have chosen the traditional methodology of source- and influence-studies for a second reason. At least until more rigorous standards for internal structural comparisons have been accepted within the scholarly community, I mistrust the purely "aesthetic" argument. The empirical methods of literary history have been proven valuable to literary scholarship for over a century. In this conservatism I concur with Robert Spiller when he cautions that "The careful scholar will try whenever possible to check one kind of evidence against the other, using both the traditional and the new experimental techniques."[9]

The preceding has used the terms "influence" and "source" in combination. Jan Brandt Corstius in his discussion of the concepts unwittingly reveals the considerable variety of research carried on under the rubric of "influence." It has been used to designate the effect of a social factor on an author (the rise of the bourgeoisie on Richardson), on a genre (the epistolary novel); the effect of one literary tradition on another (English literature on French literature, and vice versa) or on a literary movement (Shakespeare on French Romanticism); the effect of a writer on a society (Descartes on seventeenth century England) or on another writer (Coleridge on Wordsworth), and of work on work.[10]

While I find myself in sympathy with Guillén's plea for a simplification of the theoretical language, I feel that in discarding the term "source" for "influence" he has sacrificed precisely that concern for the text he had earlier advocated. Thus, I shall hereinafter refer to this thesis as a "source study" because the term, I think, more accurately reflects the study's emphasis on the relationship amongst the works under examination. The term has the additional advantage of focusing attention on the "recepteur" in an influence-type comparison. Chauncey Sanders remarks that "the difference is largely, if not wholly, one of attitude. The student of Marlowe thinks of the relation between Shakspere and Marlowe as an instance of Marlowe's influence; to the student of Shakspere, it is a matter of Marlowe's being one of Shakspere's sources."[11]

Codifying traditional research techniques, Sanders enumerates the elements of biography important to source study. He lists 1.) school curricula of the writer, 2.) books read or known to have been in his library, 3.) his general reading habits, 4.) languages studied or read by him, and 5.) "all other elements of the author's life that may have served as sources in his works,"[12] including family, friends, habits and environment. It is to his excellent explication of these techniques that the methodology of chapter two is indebted.

Curiously enough, antipathy to source studies is not limited to the academic world. The second major methodological problem of this thesis is O'Neill's rejection of notions of influence, and the complications which this introduces into a discussion of his sources.

As noted in the introduction, O'Neill directly answered the question of his Greek sources when it was posed to him by critic Arthur H. Quinn. O'Neill said:

> The Trilogy of Aeschylus was what I had in mind. As for individual characters, I did not consciously follow any one of the Greek dramatists. On the contrary, I tried my best to forget all about their differing Electras, etc. All I wanted to borrow was the theme-pattern of Aeschylus (and the old legends) and to reinterpret it in modern psychological terms with Fate and the Furies working from within the individual soul.[13]

To some scholars O'Neill's conscious naming of Aeschylus and negligent mention of the other "Greek dramatists," would end the enquiry, and for many it has. But once familiar with O'Neill's hostility to this kind of study, the scholar would do well to heed the caveat of Spiller that "the expressed intentions of the author or the reactions of contemporary critics may lead to conclusions which have little bearing on what the author actually achieved."[14]

Another inquiry into O'Neill's sources provides a parallel case in point. In 1929, a candidate for a master's degree from Northwestern University, preparing a thesis on O'Neill's use of psychoanalytic material received a response from O'Neill to two earlier letters requesting his views on her hypothesis. The letter, dated 13 October,1929 and included as an appendix to the thesis, is remarkable if only for the vehemence with which the usually mild-mannered, courteous O'Neill answered. The latter said in part:

> There is no conscious use of psychoanalytic material in any of my plays. All of them could easily be written by a dramatist who had never heard of the Freudian theory and was simply guided by an intuitive psychological insight into human beings and their life-impulsions that is as old as Greek drama. It is true I am enough of a student of

> modern psychology to be fairly familiar with the theories of Freud and his school, and to have realized the Freudian implications inherent in the actions of some of my characters while I was portraying them; but this was always an afterthought and never consciously was I for a moment influenced to shape my material along the lines of any psychological theory. It was my dramatic instinct and my own personal experience with human life that alone guided me.
>
> . . .
>
> If I have been influenced unconsciously it must have been by this book [Jung's Psychology of the Unconscious] more than any other psychological work. But this 'unconscious' influence stuff strikes me as always extremely suspicious! It's so darned easy to prove! I would say that what has influenced my plays the most is my knowledge of the drama of all time--particularly Greek tragedy--and not any books on psychology![15]

The student, Martha Carolyn Sparrow, reluctantly withdrew the central argument of her thesis in light of O'Neill's statement. But her thesis-supervisor, Arthur Nethercot, in a later article discussing this reaction by O'Neill, relates Sparrow's finding that Freudian terminology used in the 1920 edition of Beyond the Horizon was systematically omitted from the 1925 edition. Of the omissions, he writes:

> Perhaps too much significance should not be attached to these eliminations, since O'Neill, on the advice of his producers and critics, had revised and shortened his whole play, but nevertheless the suppression might indicate the dramatist's 'unconscious' reluctance to associate himself directly with psychoanalysis at the later period when it was being talked about so widely.[16]

Growing more bold, he argues that an analysis of Strange Interlude, another of the works O'Neill denied as having been influenced by psychoanalysis, "makes the conclusion unavoidable that O'Neill— consciously or unconsciously--has taken Herr Freud to himself."[17]

Perhaps O'Neill subscribed to the view that literature is to be valued only insofar as it is new; that the acknowledgement of sources other than the artist's native imagination would be an admission of his lack of originality or creativity. Or perhaps, though he created many characters (the Mannons of Mourning Becomes Electra among them) who are products of and often slaves to their pasts, he resisted thinking of himself as the sum of his experience. One of his biographers notes that he occasionally reshaped his biography: "O'Neill himself was responsible for some of the misinformation: apparently, being an instinctive dramatist, he could not resist touching up and revising his past, but in some instances it seems that he went out of his way to confuse biographers who would one day retrace his trail."[18] Whatever his reasons for rejecting the study of his sources, they are not shared by the many psychoanalytic critics who have persisted in trying to discover them. Given his disparaging attitude toward source studies, one would hardly expect O'Neill to have been meticulous in recalling precisely which works served as his sources for Mourning Becomes Electra; given this hostility, one might even suspect that O'Neill may have intentionally distorted the record to frustrate such research. And as many critics have gullibly reported, the modern work appears startlingly original when compared only with the Oresteia of Aeschylus. The statement to Quinn must certainly be taken into account, but only as one piece of evidence to be weighed against others from the works themselves.

A third major methodological problem remains, that of defining the scope of this study. The number of potential source works for any literary creation is almost infinite, though some practical limits are suggested by the record of the author's reading and experience. In comparing O'Neill's work with those of Aeschylus and Euripides only, I have chosen not to consider two other dramas which seem on face to be equally plausible as sources for Mourning Becomes Electra. Those two works are the Electra of Sophocles and that of Hugo von Hoffmansthall.

I have omitted consideration of the former because in the entire secondary literature on Mourning Becomes Electra, only one article seriously advances Sophocles' work as its primary source.[19] Moreover, I believe the general rejection of Sophocles as O'Neill's model to be justified. An account of the differences between the two works would require lengthy and more complex argument than I could profitably put forward here, but I would suggest that an important element of such a comparison would be Sophocles' use of Chrysothemis as a foil to Electra. It is significant that O'Neill, like Aeschylus and Euripides, focuses his drama on the Electra/Orestes dyad.

A comparison of O'Neill's work with the Electra of Hugo von Hoffmansthall might prove more fruitful, as both writers were fascinated by Freudian psychology, and O'Neill is known to have seen and admired a production of von Hoffmansthall's Electra. My own investigation of this possible source was limited by my inability to read in the original German. But an examination of several translations of the work convinces me that von Hoffmansthall's use of the character Chrysothemis is similar in important ways to that of Sophocles.

The possible influence of von Hoffmansthall on Mourning Becomes Electra remains to be explored, though my reading of both suggests that their Electras, while both exhibiting pathological behaviour patterns which owe much to Freud, are more different than alike.

Two minor methodological questions remain, both rooted in the inescapable problem of the comparatist, the necessity of knowing all languages. Inevitably falling short of this aspiration, I have relied on the generous assistance of two fellow postgraduate students for my understanding of the German and Italian secondary literature noted in the bibliography.

The second and potentially more troublesome question is the choice of texts for comparison, particularly the texts of Aeschylus and Euripides. The fact that I do not read Greek is fortunately of little importance to this study. As the biographical research of chapter one reveals, O'Neill almost certainly did not read Greek either, thus his source or sources were translations. But the choice of translations is problematic. A number of fairly new translations were available to O'Neill during the period he probably read the Greeks intensively, but biographical evidence does not even record specific works read, let alone which translations. The choice of translation on so little evidence will inevitably be somewhat arbitrary. I have compromised with an anachronism, the texts of the University of Chicago Complete Greek Tragedies edited by David Grene and Richmond Lattimore, on the assumption that the most authoritative modern prose translation will most faithfully reflect the original Greek text on which all earlier translations available to O'Neill were also based. With perhaps one exception, the comparisons made are structural ones which, though illustrated by quotation from the Greek sources, do not rely on specific wording for their support. Having read a number of translations contemporary with O'Neill's reading, I am convinced that any one of them might have served to illustrate the contentions in chapter three. The text of Mourning Becomes Electra used throughout this study is, of course, the Horace Liveright edition of 1931.

In summary, this thesis will make use of both external and internal evidence in comparing O'Neill's trilogy with the works of Aeschylus and Euripides. Its methodology, while placing major emphasis on textual comparison, is still modeled on that of the traditional source study. O'Neill's pronouncement on his sources, because it fits into a larger pattern of denial of influence and a tendency to be less than candid in retelling his past, will not be accepted as the final authority on the question of O'Neill's Greek sources.

FOOTNOTES : CHAPTER ONE

[1] "The Concept of Influence in Comparative Literature," Yearbook of Comparative and General Literature VII (1958), p. 31.

[2] Ihab H. Hassan, "The Problem of Influence in Literary History: Notes Towards a Definition," Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism XIV (1955), p. 76.

[3] Claude Pichois and Andre Rousseau, La Littérature Comparée 3rd ed. (Paris: Armand Colin, 1967), p. 76.

[4] Hassan, p. 67. I have consciously chosen quotations from Hassan which point up this contradiction, but in doing so, have slightly distorted his argument. In fairness, his argument might be thus paraphrased: at very least the concept of influence should be clarified and used more rigorously; at most, it should be supplanted by a new concept.

[5] "Literatura Como Sistema (sobre fuentes, influencias y valores literarios)," Filologia Romanza IV (1957), p. 4.

[6] Guillén, p. 11.

[7] p. 35.

[8] Comparative Literature: Matter and Method (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1969), p. 225.

[9] "Literary History," in The Aims and Methods of Scholarship in Modern Languages and Literatures, ed. James Thorpe, 2nd ed. (New York: Modern Language Association, 1970), p. 66.

[10] Introduction to the Comparative Study of Literature (New York: Random House, 1968), p. 180 ff.

[11] An Introduction to Research in English Literary History (New York: Macmillan, 1952), p. 209.

[12] Sanders, p. 191.

[13] A History of the American Drama from the Civil War to the Present (New York: Harper & Row, 1936), p. 255.

[14] p. 67.

[15] Martha Carolyn Sparrow, "The Influence of Psychoanalytic Material on the Plays of Eugene O'Neill" (Unpublished dissertation, Northwestern University, 1931), p. 77.

[16] "Psychoanalyzing of O'Neill," Modern Drama III (December, 1960), p. 250.

[17] Nethercot, p. 250.

[18] Louis Sheaffer, O'Neill: Son and Playwright (Boston: Little, Brown, 1968), xi-xii.

[19] Pier Luigi Valenti, "'Il lutto s'addice ad Elettra' die E.G. O'Neill e la tragedia greca," Convivium XXVIII (June, 1960), 318-329.

CHAPTER TWO: EXTERNAL EVIDENCE

Eugene O'Neill's biography provides little direct evidence as to which of the two Greek dramatists under consideration provided the inspiration for his Mourning Becomes Electra, but it does illustrate that O'Neill developed a life-long interest in and appreciation of Greek drama. This chapter will attempt to establish as accurately as possible what knowledge of Greek language and literature O'Neill commanded at different points in his career.

His earliest recorded contact with the Greeks came during his years at Betts Academy, a residential secondary school in Stamford, Connecticut. In addition to courses in English, Latin, French, and natural history, he is reported to have studied and done well in Roman and Greek history. These subjects "were stressed as a background for learning classical languages and . . . helped spark his later fascination with Greek drama," according to his biographers.[1]

Although he studied Greek history at that time, there is no evidence that O'Neill studied the Greek language or Greek drama specifically. In fact, in a letter written to his editor in 1926, he remarked that he was starting to study "ancient Greek," which he "never 'took' at college or prep."[2]

During the summer after he left Betts, O'Neill is reported to have taken considerable interest in literature, though none of the Greek dramatists are to be found in the catalogue of his readings:

> Eugene also tried to emulate Nietzsche's poetic style. Although in later years he professed to have had no real literary leanings until he was well into his twenties, he now began to write poetry. It was derivative from Baudelaire

> as well as from Nietzsche--and it was not very good. Baudelaire and Dowson had joined Swinburne and Wilde in his admiration.[3]

In 1912, during his stay at the Gaylord Farm Sanitarium, Strindberg was added to the list of writers O'Neill read and admired, and he read Dostoevski's The Idiot.[4]

His next encounter with the drama of the Greeks, however, did not come until his year in George Baker Pierce's playwriting course at Harvard University in 1914-15. The only one of his fellow students in whom O'Neill confided, William Laurence, recalled that "We talked about Nietzsche, of course, and I talked my head off about Ibsen's Brand and about Peer Gynt. . . . I also talked about Greek drama and Gorky. These seemed to open new worlds to O'Neill."[5]

The following year O'Neill met George Cram Cook, the moving force behind the creation of the Provincetown Players and later of the Playwrights' Theatre. The Gelbs describe him and his influence on O'Neill:

> Cook, called 'Jig' by his friends, was the next in a series of older men to cast a notable influence on O'Neill's life. O'Neill's senior by fifteen years, he was a Greek scholar and university professor from Davenport, Iowa. . . . Erudite and mystical, Jig regretted not having been born a Greek of the fourth century B.C. He yearned to recreate the Athenian cradle of art and philosophy and spent his life trying to impose his dream on his surroundings; . . .[6]

Evidence of O'Neill's interest in Greek drama during this period also comes from the Gelbs' recreation of a typical pub conversation which O'Neill might have had with his friends Terry Carlin and Slim Martin in Provincetown:

> Recurrently the theme of Greek tragedy came up, explained and elaborated upon by O'Neill and Terry for the furtherance of Slim's education.

> O'NEILL: 'In Greek tragedy the characters are inexorably pushed on the road by fate. Once a Greek tragedian started to write a play, his characters never could deviate from that road on which fate was pushing them. Life itself is the same as that. You get on a road and no matter what you do or how you try to change or correct your life, you can't do it, because Fate or Kismet, or whatever you call it, will push you down the road.'[7]

The next biographical evidence of O'Neill's knowledge of and interest in Greek tragedy is found in his letter to his editor, Manuel Komroff, in 1926. After having informed Komroff that he had undertaken the study of Greek, he commented:

> If in three or four years I'm able to read Greek tragedy in the original and enjoy it--the sound as well as the meaning--I'll have made a grand refuge for my soul to dive deeply and coolly into at moments when modern life--and drama--become too damn humid and shallow to be borne.[8]

There is no evidence, however, that he actually achieved his goal, and a study of his artistic and personal turmoil in the period between this letter and the writing of Mourning Becomes Electra suggests that it is unlikely that he would have had the time to do so.[9] The fact that he did not master languages readily, reading French only with difficulty[10] despite having studied it in secondary school[11] reinforces this conclusion.

Sometime before 1926 O'Neill had apparently read Hugo von Hoffmansthall's Electra, for in the spring of that year he urged Kenneth Macgowan, a co-director with O'Neill and Robert Edmond Jones of the Playwrights' Theatre, to mount a production of the play in translation.[12]

It was also in 1926 that O'Neill began to make notes in his work diary about a "modern psychological drama using one of the old legend plots of Greek tragedy for its basic theme."[13] It is significant that both of the story-themes he was considering for his modern drama, the Medea and the Electra, are subjects of extant tragedies by Euripides;

O'Neill could not have discovered the Medea theme among the works of Aeschylus.

In the next such work diary note, made in October, 1928, O'Neill determined that the "story of Electra and family [is] psychologically most interesting."[14]

Because it is often cited by commentators on O'Neill's Electra as conclusive proof that one or another of the Greek dramatists was O'Neill's source, the diary entry of November, 1928 should perhaps be quoted at some length. In it O'Neill noted his dissatisfaction with the treatment accorded Electra in the Greek versions with which he was familiar:

> Greek plot idea--give modern Electra figure in play tragic ending worthy of character. In Greek story she peters out into undramatic married banality. Such a character contained too much tragic fate within her soul to permit this--why should Furies have let Electra escape unpunished? Why did chain of fated crime and retribution ignore her mother's murderess?--a weakness in what remains to us of Greek tragedy that there is no play about Electra's life after the murder of Clytemnestra. Surely it possesses as imaginative tragic possibilities as any of their plots![15]

This entry, the basis of many of the claims that Aeschylus was the source of O'Neill's inspiration, will be examined in detail in chapter four.

While his conception of drama and his readings in Greek tragedy were probably most important in his decision to write Mourning Becomes Electra, another source of motivation for his decision is noted by his biographers:

> In addition, the fact that Eugene Jr. was now distinguishing himself as a Greek scholar at Yale helped in a minor way to influence O'Neill's decision to attempt a classical trilogy. At this point O'Neill was almost pathetically anxious to solidify his relationship with his older son, whose scholarship he admired. Electra, O'Neill

vaguely believed, would give them a strong bond of intellectual interest.[16]

After the trilogy was produced, Eugene Jr. is reported to have discussed its Greek sources with his father, who "found that Eugene Jr. far outranked him in his knowledge of Greek tragedy."[17] O'Neill's son later became a teacher of classics at Yale University and was co-editor of a two-volume collection of Greek drama in translation published in 1938.[18]

The younger O'Neill's suicide death in 1950 precluded inquiries as to his own hypothesis about the Greek roots of his father's modern version of the *Electra*.

O'Neill did not begin to sketch out the plot and characters for his "Greek plot idea" until the spring of 1929. In the entries for April and May, he chose the Civil War as his analogue for the Trojan War, chose names which would call to mind the Greek counterparts of the characters, and named the work *Mourning Becomes Electra*. In one May entry, he noted that he had determined to "follow Greek practice and make it trilogy."[19]

After having completed the scenario for the third play in the trilogy, *The Haunted*, he noted in his diary with evident satisfaction: "have given my Yankee Electra tragic end worthy of her--and Orestes, too."[20]

The first draft of the trilogy was finished in February of 1930. On rereading this draft in late March, O'Neill wrote: "a hell of a problem, a modern tragic interpretation of classic fate without benefit of gods--for it must, before everything, remain modern psychological play--fate springing out of the family."[21]

Again, after reading the second draft which he finished in July, he reminded himself: "try for prose with simple forceful repeating accent and rhythm which will express driving insistent compulsion of passions engendered in family past, which constitute family fate (always remembering fate from within the family is modern psychological approximation of the Greek conception of fate from without, from the supernatural.)"[22]

O'Neill worked on the play until April of 1931 when a finished version was mailed to his publisher. On reading the galley proofs, he seemed satisfied that he had achieved the goal set for himself in the earlier notes. He reports: "There is a feeling of fate in it, or I am a fool--a psychological approximation of the fate in the Greek tragedies on this theme--attained without benefit of supernatural. . . ."[23]

As pervasive as Greek literature, and tragedy in particular, seem to have been in his life, a concordance of O'Neill's works records no reference to any of the three greatest Greek dramatists, Aeschylus, Sophocles or Euripides. This is the more surprising because his contemplative, autobiographical heroes and heroines are not shy about quoting other literary figures from Baudelaire to FitzGerald's Omar Khayyam.[24]

As argued in chapter one, O'Neill's honesty, or perhaps only his ability to comment on his own works with any degree of objectivity, is open to question. Nevertheless, his statement to Quinn about the sources of Mourning Becomes Electra is another important piece of evidence to be considered in this chapter.

In that quotation, O'Neill said that "the Trilogy of Aeschylus was what I had in mind. As for individual characters, I did not consciously follow any one of the Greek dramatists. On the contrary, I tried my best to forget all about their differing Electras, etc." Two things bear mention about his statement: first, that the idea of a trilogy was taken from the Oresteia of Aeschylus, a fact which seems evident and in need of little further comment; secondly, that O'Neill acknowledges in the statement having read other Greek versions of the story, presumably those of Sophocles and Euripides.

After the production of Mourning Becomes Electra, only seven plays were written by O'Neill, and only three were produced before his death in 1953. None of them used Greek themes, or in any apparent way reflected his deep reverence for Greek drama. But one small incident related by the Greek actress Katina Paxinou in a 1959 interview reveals that his enthusiasm for Greek culture had not ended with his writing career. The actress met O'Neill for the first time only after his declining health had made it impossible for him to write. She recalled the meeting in this way:

> The first time we met him was before the filming of Mourning Becomes Electra. It was 8 p.m. and the doctor allowed not more than twenty minutes. We left at two in the morning. O'Neill met us at the lift. He had big, huge, burning eyes like red coals. So elegant, tall, lean, with beautiful hands. After midnight he invited me to act poetry in Greek.[25]

Although Mourning Becomes Electra was the only one of his many plays which was consciously modeled on Greek drama, O'Neill brought to his work a vision of drama and its tasks which he attributed to the Greeks. In one of his "Memoranda on Masks," for example, he explained his hopes for an "imaginative theatre" with reference to Greek drama and its roots:

> I mean the one true theatre, the age-old theatre, the theatre of the Greeks and Elizabethans, a theatre that could dare to boast--without committing a farcical sacrilege--that it is a legitimate descendant of the first theatre

> that sprang, by virtue of man's imaginative interpretation of life, out of his worship of Dionysus. I mean a theatre returned to its highest and sole significant function as a Temple where the religion of a poetical interpretation and symbolical celebration of life is communicated to human beings, starved in spirit by their soul-stifling daily struggle to exist as masks among masks of living.[26]

But perhaps the most eloquent expression of his aspirations to re-create the drama of the Greeks was written in a letter to critic Arthur Hobson Quinn:

> But where I feel myself most neglected is just where I set most store by myself--as a bit of a poet, who has labored with the spoken word to evolve original rhythms of beauty where beauty apparently isn't . . . and to see the transfiguring nobility of tragedy, in as near the Greek sense as one can grasp it, in seemingly the most ignoble, debased lives. . . . And my profound conviction is that this is the only subject worth writing about and that it is possible--or can be--to develop a tragic expression in terms of transfigured modern values and symbols in the theatre which may to some degree bring home to members of a modern audience their ennobling identity with the tragic figures on the stage. Of course, this is very much of a dream, but where the theatre is concerned, one must have a dream, and the Greek drama in tragedy is the noblest ever![27]

In summary, we learn from his biography that O'Neill was not a Greek scholar; his son's knowledge as a twenty-one-year-old undergraduate student of Greek surpassed his own in the field of Greek tragedy; he almost certainly did not read Greek. His working notes establish that he had at least read Euripides' Medea, and his reference to Electra's marriage to Pylades strongly indicates that he had read Euripides' Electra as well. In his only recorded statement about his sources, he specifically mentioned the "Trilogy of Aeschylus," but denied "following any of the Greek dramatists." Finally, his idea of the Greek theatre, especially Greek tragedy, was central to his conception of the task of the modern theatre.

FOOTNOTES : CHAPTER TWO

[1] Arthur and Barbara Gelb, O'Neill (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), p. 77. This chapter will make extensive use of the Gelb biography because it is not only the most recent, but also the most comprehensive yet published. As evidenced in their acknowledgements, the book makes use of all earlier biographical studies.

[2] Ibid., p. 699.

[3] Ibid., p. 122.

[4] Ibid., p. 233.

[5] Ibid., p. 277.

[6] Ibid., p. 277.

[7] Ibid., p. 352. Although this technique of reconstructing typical conversations betrays the Gelbs' journalistic background and intentions, it is perhaps an accurate way of reflecting their understanding of O'Neill's life gained from hundreds of interviews with O'Neill's friends and acquaintances which they conducted in preparing their biography, and which could not be condensed in any more suitable way.

[8] Ibid., p. 699.

[9] Between 1926 and the completion of Mourning Become Electra in 1931, O'Neill wrote three other lengthy plays (Lazarus Laughed, Strange Interlude and Dynamo), and participated in the casting and production of three of his works (Strange Interlude, Marco Millions and The Great God Brown). During these six years, he struggled with the decision to leave his unhappy marriage to Agnes Boulton. In 1928 they separated and O'Neill moved to France to live with the woman who was to become his third wife, Carlotta Monterrey. The subsequent estrangement and divorce from Boulton were widely publicized, and O'Neill spent much time moving from place to place, including a four-month cruise to the Far East with Monterrey in late 1928, to escape gossips and reporters. Also, during part of this period, O'Neill was involved in a lengthy plagiarism suit.

[10] Barrett H. Clark, Eugene O'Neill: The Man and His Plays (New York: Dover Publications, 1947), p. 161.

[11] Gelb, p. 77.

[12] Ibid., p. 699.

[13] "Working Notes and Extracts from a Fragmentary Work Diary," in Barrett H. Clark, European Theories of the Drama with a Supplement on the American Drama (New York: Crown Publishers, 1947), p. 530.

[14] "Working Notes," number 2, p. 530.

[15] Ibid., number 3, p. 530.

[16] Gelb, p. 699.

[17] , p. 743.

[18] Whitney J. Oates and Eugene O'Neill, Jr. The Complete Greek Drama (New York: Random House, 1938).

[19] "Working Notes," number 8, p. 532.

[20] Ibid., number 12 (August, 1929), p. 532.

[21] Ibid., number 16, p. 533.

[22] Ibid., number 20, p. 534. In this note, as in several preceding, O'Neill recorded his struggle over the use of masks. Because the note makes it clear that masks would have been employed symbolically rather than purely to "hellenize" the play, they are not directly relevant to the question of O'Neill's Greek sources.

[23] Ibid., number 36, p. 536.

[24] J. Russell Reaver, comp. An O'Neill Concordance (Detroit: Gale Research Co., 1969).

[25] Laurence Kitchin, interview in the London Times, 1 June 1959; reprinted in Kitchin, Mid-Century Drama (London: Faber & Faber, 1960), p. 185.

[26] Originally published in The American Spectator, January, 1933; reprinted in Oscar Cargill, N. Bryllion Fagin and William J. Fisher, eds. O'Neill and His Plays: Four Decades of Criticism (New York: New York University Press, 1961), pp. 121-122.

[27] Quinn, A History of the American Drama from the Civil War to the Present (New York: Harper & Row, 1936), p. 199.

CHAPTER THREE: INTERNAL EVIDENCE

Having established that O'Neill almost certainly read both versions of the Electra story, it is necessary to examine the texts of the plays to determine more accurately O'Neill's indebtedness to each of his Greek models.

Before proceeding to the actual texts, however, it is important to isolate and identify those elements of the Agamemnon-Electra myth which are common to all of the ancient Greek versions which O'Neill consulted. Such an examination of common elements prevents the assumption of influence from any strictly literary source when the material in question might have easily been gleaned from a mythological handbook or manual.[1] In the comparison of texts which follows, I have thus isolated those elements of the Electra theme which Philip Hunt Decker's thorough survey of modern mythological handbooks found to be common to most or all accounts of the myth.[2]

O'Neill's plot centers on the Mannon family: Ezra (Agamemnon), a staunch representative of New England moral rectitude, returning from his service as a Union general in the United States' Civil War; Christine (Clytemnestra), his handsome, sensuous wife; their daughter, Lavinia (Electra)[3], as bitterly resentful of her mother as she is fiercely loyal to her father; her brother, Orin (Orestes), the favourite of Christine, and Adam Brant (Aegisthus), a ship's captain and Ezra Mannon's vengeful cousin.

The first play of the trilogy, The Homecoming, begins with the news of the end of the Civil War reaching the Mannon household.

Lavinia's recent discovery of Christine's affair with Brant and the imminent return of her father lead her to confront her mother with the choice of giving up Brant or having the relationship revealed to Ezra. Knowing that Ezra would never divorce her so that she could marry Brant, and moreover would use his influence as a shipbuilder to blacklist the captain, depriving him of both his livelihood and his second love, the sea, Christine rejects the second possibility, revelation. Though she promises to break with Brant, she is also unwilling to take this course, and begins to consider a third plan, that of murdering Ezra. Having convinced her more cautious lover that this plan is their only hope of happiness, Christine arranges for Brant to buy some poison in Boston and mail it to her. She furthers her scheme by mentioning in the tones of the worried wife her concern about Ezra's heart ailment to the local doctor, a notorious gossip.

The Ezra Mannon who returns from the war only superficially resembles the man described by his family and the townspeople chorus. While his ramrod posture remains, he has been softened, as he himself explains to Christine, by all of the death which surrounded him on the battlefield; he pleads with Christine to try to love him.

Christine is touched by his plea, but it comes too late; too many years of hatred and her love for Brant prevent their reconciliation. She struggles between trying to allay his suspicions and repelling the tenderness he shows for her. Disappointed with her cold response to his confession, Ezra again assumes his former hardness and prods Christine into revealing the reason for her aloofness. In a bitter tirade she blames him for the failure of their love and reveals her liaison with Brant.

As she had hoped, the shock of the revelation causes him to have a heart attack. Pretending to give him his medicine, she gives him instead a pellet of the poison. Lavinia, having awakened, enters the room and finds her father apparently suffering a heart attack. Mannon has realized the deception, however, and before dying points to Christine and gasps that he has been poisoned. Christine, overcome, faints and drops the box of poison pellets on the floor. In going to her assistance, Lavinia discovers the box and the act ends with Lavinia swearing vengeance on her mother and beseeching her dead father for help.

In this, the first play of the trilogy, O'Neill uses a number of elements from the Agamemnon myth. The plot of the returning general being murdered by his unfaithful wife is perhaps the most obvious. But O'Neill also incorporates into his plot a family history which is intended to resemble the story of the House of Atreus. He begins with the rivalry of two brothers, Abe (Atreus) and David (Thyestes) Mannon, for the love of Marie Brantome (a conflation of Aerope and Pelopia) who worked as a nurse in the Mannon household. Outraged by his brother's success in winning her love, Abe Mannon expels David and the pregnant Marie from the house. They are married and a son, Adam, is born. Humiliation and poverty combine to shorten the lives of both of his parents (David committing suicide), and Adam, taking part of his mother's surname as his own, swears revenge on the Mannon family which he holds responsible. In this O'Neill echoes the prophecy made to Thyestes that in fathering a son by Pelopia he would gain an avenger. Although there is no parallel to the feast of Thyestes and his curse on the House of Atreus, the sense of one generation's quarrels resulting in conflicts of the second generation is maintained, and even the detail of the brothers' love for the same woman is reflected in O'Neill's version.

In a more general way, the curse of Myrtilus, the original family curse, might be said to be reflected in the Puritanism which the Mannons have inherited from their ancestors. Ezra in his confession to Christine remarks: "That's always been the Mannon's way of thinking. They went to the white meeting-house on Sabbaths and meditated on death. Life was a dying. Being born was starting to die. Death was being born" (Homecoming, III, p. 82).

The two curses seem to be unified in the Mannon House itself, the setting of all but one act of the entire trilogy. Abe Mannon had built the house after destroying the one in which he and David had vied for Marie's love. Christine describes it as a "sepulchre, the whited one of the Bible--pagan temple front stuck like a mask on Puritan gray ugliness! It was just like old Abe Mannon to build such a monstrosity--as a temple for his hatred" (Homecoming, I, p. 31). Thus Puritanism and David's curse on his brother are joined in the literal equivalent of the "House" of Atreus and Pelops.

Indirectly, the curse of Puritanism could be shown to be the cause of Mannon's death, raising the question of Christine's motivation in killing him. Although mentioned only in discreet terms, Christine's hatred of Ezra, which she dates from their wedding night, is apparently the result of Mannon's Puritan inability to reconcile "sinful" sexual love with "pure" non-sexual love. Early in the first play Christine admits to Lavinia: "I loved him once--before I married him--incredible as that seems now! . . . He was silent and mysterious and romantic! But marriage soon turned his romance into--disgust!" (Homecoming, II, p. 51). Later, in taunting Mannon with her infidelity, she says of Adam: "He's gentle and tender, he's everything you've never been. He's what I've longed for all these years with you--a lover!" (Homecoming, IV, p. 93). Except for the possible but oblique parallel of Clytemnestra's sexual rivalry with Cassandra, this motive seems to find no source in the Greek stories.

Closer to the myth, however, is Christine's charge that Ezra had "murdered" one of their children, as Agamemnon had sacrificed Iphigenia. Although this motive is not fully developed until the second play, the first of the trilogy hints that Mannon's insistence that Orin join the army was viewed as a sort of murder by Christine:

> I loved him [Orin] until he let you and your father nag him into the war, inspite of my begging him not to leave me alone. . . . I hope you realize I never would have fallen in love with Adam if I'd had Orin with me. When he had gone there was nothing left--but hate and a desire to be revenged--and a longing for love! (Homecoming, II, pp. 51-52)

Christine's "loss" of Orin, like Clytemnestra's loss of Iphigenia, provides a second motive for Mannon's murder and one more closely resembling those of the Greek myth.

The Homecoming thus utilizes not only the plot, the family history and the sense of family curse common to the Greek stories of Agamemnon's homecoming, but also some of the motivations of his murderers.

The second play of the trilogy, The Hunted, begins two days after Mannon's death, just before the return of Orin. Christine's foresight in exaggerating Ezra's heart condition has been successful in preventing any suspicion, save that of Lavinia, about his death. Orin returns from the war wounded, dispirited and cynical. There ensues a subtle battle between Christine and Lavinia for Orin's loyalty. Christine has on her side the special closeness to Orin cultivated from his birth; Lavinia is able to play on Orin's jealousy of Brant who threatens his relationship with Christine.

Christine succeeds in convincing Orin that Lavinia's accusations result from a grief-induced insanity until Lavinia baits two traps to prove to him Christine's guilt. In the first, she places the box of poison pellets, which she found the night of the murder, over the heart of Mannon's corpse as it lies in state, in order to allow Orin to observe Christine's reaction, which proves to be one of guilt and fear.

The second ruse is to allow Christine to think that they have gone for an overnight visit with friends so that she will try to contact Brant to warn him of Orin's jealous suspicions. They follow her to Boston and to the wharf where Brant's ship lies at anchor. Through a skylight of the ship's cabin, Orin and Lavinia observe their mother's tryst with her lover and overhear their plans to sail together for the South Pacific within the week. While Brant walks Christine to the end of the wharf, the avengers hide themselves in Brant's cabin, and when he returns, Orin shoots and kills him. To avert suspicion, they rummage the cabin to simulate a theft, dropping the articles stolen into the harbour.

When the two return home, Christine is waiting for them on the front porch. Orin, still enraged as his mother's infidelity, cruelly announces to her that he has shot her lover, producing a Boston newspaper with the small story of the "murder-robbery" as proof. At the news, Christine suffers a total breakdown, and collapses moaning on the lowest stair of the porch, incoherent and inconsolable. This stirs in Orin his former love for her and he tries desperately to convince her that he can replace Brant in her life. But he too is only partially in control of himself and when Lavinia orders him to leave his mother and go into the house, he mechanically obeys. Christine partially regains her senses and resolves to kill herself. In a subtly understated exchange, Lavinia, understanding her mother's intention, first impulsively makes an attempt to stop her, then turns her back with the words "It is justice" (Hunted, IV, p. 180).

After the shot sounds, Orin, now even less self-controlled than before, sobs unrestrainedly, blaming himself for her death. The play ends with Lavinia trying to quiet and sooth Orin, frightened that he will reveal their responsibility for the two deaths.

Continuing the Agamemnon story, then, O'Neill's second play deals with the vengeance of the children on the murderers of their father. The theme of the family curse is repeated in the change which the war has wrought in Orin. Unlike his father who was freed from a Puritan preoccupation with death by the surfeit of it in war, Orin, though once sensitive like his mother, becomes obsessed by the thought of death, becomes a "Mannon".

"My mind is full of ghosts," he says to Lavinia on his return. "I can't grasp anything but war, in which he [Ezra Mannon] was so alive. He was the war to me--the war that would never end until I died. I can't understand peace--his end!" (Hunted, I, p. 113).

Although Orin's motivations differ markedly from those of Orestes in the Greek versions, Lavinia seems to retain a number of the motives of her Greek counterpart. Electra's ill-treatment at the hands of Aegisthus might be seen as parallel to Brant's pseudocourtship of Lavinia and her disillusionment when she discovers that his attentions are only a subterfuge to allow him respectably to visit Christine. Her bitterness toward Brant is thus partially that of an unrequited lover as she reveals in her reaction to his death: "(Lavinia speaks to the corpse in a grim bitter tone) How could you love that vile old woman so? (She throws off this thought--harshly) But you're dead! It's ended!" (Hunted, IV, p. 168).

Throughout the first two plays Christine taunts Lavinia with seeking vengeance not for her father, but for herself; with persecuting her mother not as her father's murderer, but as the rival who had stolen Brant's love. Beside her ability to manipulate Orin, this charge is Christine's only weapon in her war against Lavinia's implacable hatred.

In general terms, the second play of O'Neill's trilogy follows the Agamemnon story with the revenge murder of the mother and the usurper, and the further development of the theme of the curse on the house. However, the motivations of the characters in The Hunted begin to depart radically from the traditional stories, a process of divergence which is even more apparent in the third work of the group, The Haunted.

Perhaps the most difficult task facing O'Neill in his adaptation of the Greek myth of the House of Atreus was to find an equivalent which would appear credible to his more skeptical modern audience, for the Greek belief in deities of retribution and justice. As he mused in the first of his work diary notes:

> Is it possible to get modern psychological approximation of Greek sense of fate into such a play, which an intelligent audience of today, possessed of no belief in gods or supernatural retribution could accept and be moved by?--[4]

In turning to psycho-pathological explanations, the ghostly reoccurence of the love-jealousy triangle of the first play, and even the "reincarnation" of Ezra and Christine in the resemblance their children come to bear to them, O'Neill has taken this third part of the trilogy farther from the Greek plot than either of the preceding two.

The play begins with the reopening of the Mannon house in anticipation of the return of Orin and Lavinia from a voyage to the South Pacific which they undertook almost immediately after their mother's suicide. When they appear on stage, O'Neill has used every possible device to emphasize their resemblance to their parents. Lavinia, who formerly had always worn black, pulled her hair severely from her face, and carried herself in imitation of her father, now wears her hair in curls, a dress in her mother's colour, green, and walks with Christine's sensual grace. Orin has grown a closely-cropped beard and carries himself with his father's martial precision.

The past is not evoked only in their appearance, however, as their first conversation reveals:

> Lavinia: (her eyes on his face--as if she were willing her strength into him) Well? You don't see any ghosts, do you? Tell me!
>
> Orin: (obediently) No.
>
> Lavinia: Because there are none! Tell me you know there are none, Orin!
>
> Orin: (as before) Yes. . . . (She takes his arm and leads him to the steps. He walks like an automaton. When they reach the spot where his mother had sat moaning, the last time he had seen her alive . . . he stops with a shudder.) It was here--she--the last time I saw her alive--
>
> Lavinia: (quickly urging him on commandingly) That is all past and finished! The dead have forgotten us! We've forgotten them! Come! (Haunted, I, p. 200).

The plot thus develops not as the traditional persecution and expiation struggle of Orestes against the moral powers, be they conscience or the Erinyes. Rather, the struggle is between Lavinia, who now wants to live and forget the past, and Orin who, obsessed by his own guilt and his fear that Lavinia will leave him, continually threatens to reveal their role in the two deaths.

Lavinia, having blossomed into the full sensual womanhood of her mother, like her seeks love. She returns home determined to marry Peter Niles, a childhood friend of hers and her brother's, who had courted her during the war. The triangle of love and jealousy involving Ezra, Christine and Adam is now repeated with Peter representing for Orin the threat to his relationship which Adam had represented for Ezra.

Orin in his madness tries to keep Lavinia tied to him by writing a "family history" in which their guilt is revealed. He gives the manuscript in a packet to Hazel Niles, his former sweetheart and Peter's sister, with instructions that Peter is to read it on the eve of his marriage to Lavinia or in case "anything happens" to Orin. Lavinia discovers his scheme and manages to retrieve the packet before anyone reads it, but only by promising Orin to do anything he should ask of her.

He asks that she give up Peter and that she seal their pact of guilt in sexual union: "How else can I be sure you won't leave me? You would feel as guilty then as I do! You would be as damned as I am!" (Haunted, III, p. 239).[5] Orin's resolve breaks, however, and Lavinia, revolted at his suggestion, shouts at him: "I hate you! I wish you were dead! You're too vile to live. You'd kill yourself if you weren't a coward!" (Haunted, III, pp. 239-240).

Orin convinces himself that the voice is not Lavinia's but his mother's ghost demanding justice for his "murder" of her: He strides from the room "to clean his pistol" just as Peter arrives to visit Lavinia. As earlier with her mother, Lavinia is torn between stopping his suicide and allowing it, thus freeing herself from the fear which he has held over her plans for happiness and love. She chooses not to stop him and clings to Peter, awaiting the inevitable pistol shot.

The final scene again finds Lavinia dressed in black, drained of her former vitality, but still desperately determined to find love. An interview with Hazel followed by a visit from Peter convince her, however, that the curse has not yet been appeased, and that the Mannon ghosts have begun to haunt Peter. Hazel's story of the envelope from Orin and Orin's subsequent suicide have raised suspicions in his mind and a new bitterness replaces his former innocent benevolence. Frantically she tries to seduce Peter, but "at the topmost pitch of desperate frantic abandonment" says "Want me! Take me, Adam!" (Haunted, IV, p. 254). If Peter's Victorian reaction had not convinced her of the hopelessness of her escape from the Mannon ghosts, the substitution of Brant's name for Peter's would have. She concludes: "Always the dead between! It's no good trying any more!" (Haunted, IV, p. 254).

Unable to account for her profligate behaviour, Peter associates it with Orin's suicide and begins to question her about her conduct on the South Pacific island she and Orin visited. Now totally despairing, Lavinia invents a passionate love affair with a native chieftain as a method both of insuring the end of Peter's love and of explaining Orin's suicide.

Peter leaves and she enters the "house of the dead," vowing "I'm the last Mannon. I've got to punish myself! . . . I'll live alone with the dead, and keep their secrets, and let them hound me, until the curse is paid out and the last Mannon is let die!" (Haunted, IV, p. 256).

While the plot of this play is least attributable to Greek sources, it can be broadly viewed as the parallel to the expiation part of the Agamemnon-Orestes plot. In the mad Orin, O'Neill has created a character having affinities with the mad Cassandra of the Agamemnon. Like her, he traces the history of the family curse and prophesies the doom yet to come for himself and Lavinia. Another interesting resemblance is the use O'Neill has made of Pylades in the character of Peter, his rejection of the "and they lived happily ever after" ending of his marriage to Electra. More prominent than in either of the other two plays is the element of the curse on the family. Although it is no longer clear from whence the curse springs, whether from David's original curse on his brother, the guilt of the brother and sister for the murder of their mother, or the more pervasive curse of Puritanism, the moral code emptied of faith, which has become a part of them, the suggestion that the characters' fates are not wholly within their own power is strong.

In addition to using a Greek mythical plot and to some extent, Greek themes, O'Neill experiments in Mourning Becomes Electra with various dramatic conventions borrowed from the Greek theatre. Most obvious of these are the use of a chorus and of "masks".

The chorus of townspeople appears only at the beginning of each of the plays. Their dialogues give information as to how society views the Mannon family. In the first, the chorus provides essential exposition. It informs the audience that the Mannons are the town's aristocrats and that the family fortune was made in shipping. Ezra attended West Point, served in the Mexican War, studied law, became a judge, was elected mayor and finally joined the Union army and became a general; he is seen as "cold blooded and uppish." His wife is admired for her beauty but is not well-liked by the chorus. From it we also learn that there are skeletons in the family closet (the Marie Brantome scandal). The attitudes of the townspeople become more important in the second play because it is only in allaying their suspicions that Christine can hope to escape punishment. Thus the chorus in The Hunted is used to establish that she has been successful.

The chorus scene in The Haunted is used partially as comic relief following Christine's suicide and Orin's breakdown, and partially to foreshadow the theme of the haunted past with which the rest of the play deals. In it, the chorus of men from the town drunkenly joke about ghosts until they dare one of their number to remain in the empty Mannon house from sunset to moonrise. Camouflaged by their jests, however, are their misgivings about the series of sinister events which they associate with the house.

In none of the three, then, does the chorus much resemble the traditional Greek chorus. They are no wiser than the audience; they add no "insights" about the action; they appear on the stage for only a short time, and do not participate in the main action.

The "masks" in Mourning Becomes Electra also serve a much different function in the drama. They are used not to distinguish one individual character from another, as the masks were intended in Greek tragedy, but to distinguish the "Mannons" from the rest of the world. The term "Mannon" must be extended in this context because Christine is described as wearing a mask though she is not a member of the family by heredity, and even the gardener, Seth, who has served the family for sixty years is said to wear one.

The "masks" are of course, only a peculiarly inexpressive, immobile facial expression and O'Neill occasionally uses a sudden change in expression, either the "putting on" or "taking off" of the mask, to signal a change in a character's attitude. A device of set design which serves to emphasize this mask-like quality of their faces is the use of portraits (one of Ezra which dominates his study, and a number of Mannons-past which haunt the sitting room) as the background of the action.

One commentator on the play has observed that O'Neill has approximated the classical unities of time and place in his work, but more importantly, "[t]here is also the concentration of Greek drama; the evil that has slowly grown in time is represented at the moment when it ripens towards catastrophe."[6]

A final, though perhaps superficial evocation of Greek theatre is the exterior of the Mannon house, before which many of the important scenes of the trilogy take place. In his description of the scene, O'Neill repeats the idea of the mask:

> Behind the driveway the white Grecian temple portico with its six tall columns extends across the stage. . . . The temple portico is like an incongruous white mask fixed on the house to hide its sombre gray ugliness" (Homecoming, I, p. 17).

Those who argue that Aeschylus was O'Neill's sole or principal source would seem to have a prima facie case. The strongest argument for Aeschylus is O'Neill's choice of the trilogy form and his division of the story into analogous dramatic units: the murder, the revenge and the fate of the avengers.

Similarities between the ancient and modern trilogies are more apparent in the first plays of each than in the other two parallel sets. However, the strength of this comparison is at least in part attributable to the fact that we have extant no other dramatic treatment of the murder of Agamemnon, thus no other model with which to compare the first play by O'Neill.

A number of trivial incidents with which the two plays open create a strong impression of comparability. The beacon fires of the Agamemnon signal the end of the Trojan War just as cannon fire announces the end of the American Civil War to O'Neill's modern House of Atreus. Each play begins with suggestions by a minor character that something is amiss in the "royal household," something about which he would rather not speak. The watchman of the Agamemnon, lamenting the situation in Argos says:

> The rest
> I leave to silence; for an ox stands huge upon
> my tongue. The house itself, could it take voice
> might speak
> aloud and plain. I speak to those who understand,
> but if they fail, I have forgotten everything. (ll. 34-38)

In laconic New England fashion, Seth, the Mannon family gardener, echoes his Mycenaen predecessor in speaking of Christine, O'Neill's Clytemnestra: "Never mind her. We ain't talkin' 'bout her" (Homecoming, I, p. 21).

With the exception of the well-known story elements of the affair between Clytemnestra and Aegisthus and their execution of a treacherous plot to murder Agamemnon, the two plays, particularly in their endings, betray the fundamental dissimilarities in conception of situation and character development which become increasingly apparent in the following two sets of plays.

In the Aeschylean version, Clytemnestra for nearly half the cycle holds the upper hand. At the close of the Agamemnon she says of the discontent of the elders:

> These are howls of impotent rage; forget them
> dearest; you and I
> have the power; we two shall bring good order
> to our house at least. (ll. 1672-74)

Whereas, in O'Neill's The Homecoming, Christine has fainted by the end of the play, her weakness already placing in the hands of the avengers a power over her, the threat of revelation.

These differences in the first plays then lead to very different situations in each of the second two. The Electra we encountered in The Libation Bearers, timid, wholly within the power of her mother and her mother's lover, is very different indeed from Lavinia who has placed her mother in a "terrible state of strained nerves" (The Hunted, I, p. 108) by her unrelenting watchfulness and hatred.

Even greater are the differences between the two Orestes figures. The first returns with vengeance as his goal, stirs up his hesitant sister with the same passion, uses a subterfuge to lure the murderers to his sword and kills them. By contrast, Orin Mannon, having hated his father during his lifetime, returns happy in the prospect of reestablishing his incest-shadowed relationship with his mother. It is only after he is aroused by Lavinia's taunts about his mother's lover that he resolves to kill--and then only to kill Brant.

Not only divergences in characterization but also divergence in plot make the two final plays of the trilogies problematic for Aeschylus-advocates to account for. The weak, guilt-ridden Orin does not remotely resemble the self-assured Orestes, who, confident in the justice of his act, faces the court of Athena. Although the working notes have already alerted us to the different use which O'Neill makes of the Pylades figure in Electra's ultimate fate, the introduction of Peter and his romantic interest in Lavinia are elements which cannot be explained by reference to Aeschylus' text.

One is tempted to compare the bleak ending of O'Neill's adaptation with the ending of the Aeschylean original had the Greek dramatist allowed the dark earth-spirits, the Furies or Erinyes, to win their case. When asked "Where is the place, then, where the killer's flight shall end?" (The Eumenides, 1, 422), their answer would have aptly described the sepulchral House of Mannon where Lavinia retreats to live out her punishment, "a place where happiness is never more allowed" (The Eumenides, 1, 423). Only in this way can the sombre tone of O'Neill's conclusion be explained in terms of Aeschylus.

Of the three plays by Aeschylus, Mourning Becomes Electra is most faithful to the Agamemnon, but diverges widely in both plot and characterization from the other two plays which make up the trilogy. The justification for the frequently-made assertion of O'Neill's sole use of Aeschylus seems to lie wholly on his choice of the trilogy form.

Although Euripides' Electra treats only about two-thirds of the story of O'Neill's trilogy, it provides a much closer parallel to the modern play than does the Oresteia. Most of the similarities between the former two works spring from the special fascination of each of the playwrights with the character who names their drama, Electra.

The first similarity between the two Electra-figures which an audience might notice is the austerity of their appearance. Although Aeschylus with Euripides mentions his heroine's ragged dress, the latter playwright adds the detail of her shaven head and "body wasted and dry" (l. 239). In O'Neill's stage directions, his description of Lavinia has much the same emphasis as he suggests that she appear "thin, flat-breasted and angular" (I, p. 23), dressed in stark black with her hair drawn severely away from her face. Euripides' Electra contrasts the "stable rags" (l. 304) which she wears with the "glory of Phrygian rugs" (l. 314) which surrounds her mother. Again making his point visually rather than through dialogue, O'Neill makes much of the contrast between Lavinia's intentional plainness of appearance and the sensuous green satin and curled hair of her mother Christine.

Both of the Electras under discussion seem to have had a special relationship with their murdered father. Lavinia exclaims to her father "You're the only man I'll ever love!" (Homecoming, I, p. 78), echoing Electra who, when reminded of her lost brother and father, laments "Alas, what else have I? I have no other loves" (l. 18).

Clytemnestra notes this relationship when she says to Electra: "My child, from birth you always have adored your father./ This is part of life. Some children always love/ the male, some turn more closely to their mother than to him" (11. 1102-04). Analogously, Christine says to Lavinia: "I know you, Vinnie! I've watched you ever since you were little, trying to do exactly what you're doing now! You've tried to become the wife of your father and the mother of Orin!" (Homecoming, II, p. 53). Unlike the Electra of Aeschylus, who mourns and revenges her father as a dutiful daughter, these both seem to mourn their fathers as bereft lovers.

The corollary to this unusual devotion of Electra and Lavinia to their fathers is a relationship of constant conflict with their mothers. Euripides' Electra says of Clytemnestra "my own mother, she, Tyndareus' deadly daughter,/ . . . while she breeds new children in Aegisthus' bed/ has made me . . . alien to her love (11. 60-63); or again, "Women save all their love for lovers, not for children" (1. 265).

Lavinia also talks about the alienation of her love: "So I was born of your disgust!" she says in the scene in which she confronts her mother with her knowledge of the affair with Brant. "I've always guessed that, Mother—ever since I was little--when I used to come to you--with love--but you would always push me away! I've felt it ever since I can remember--your disgust! . . . Oh, I hate you! It's only right I should hate you" (Homecoming, II, p. 51).

Curiously enough, both daughters are thought of in some sense as the children of their father only, recalling in another context Apollo's argument that a child can be born without a mother, witness Athene, but not without a father (Eumenides, 11. 57-66). Electra says of her parentage: "I was born Agamemnon's child/ formed in the flesh of Clytemnestra,/ Tyndareus' hellish daughter" (11. 115-17). And Christine tells her own daughter: ". . . I could never make myself feel you were born of any body but his!" (Homecoming, II, p. 51).

In the relationship of both Electra-figures with their brothers there are noteworthy similarities. In both it is the sister who is resolved in her plan of vengeance, the brother who must be persuaded. Both women use taunts about the mother's love to raise their sibling's anger: "Lavinia: . . . if you won't help me punish her, I hope you're not such a coward that you're willing to let her lover escape!" (Hunted, III, p. 145); and Electra sends this taunt back with a messenger who is actually Orestes in disguise:

> But in his drunken fits my mother's lover, brilliant
> man, triumphant leaps and dances on the mound
> or pelts my father's stone memorial with rocks
> and dares to shout against us with his boldened tongue:
> 'Where is your son Orestes? When will that noble youth
> come to protect your tomb?' (ll. 326-31).

These two women are not shrinking violets who hide themselves in the house only to spy for their brothers, as Aeschylus' Electra had done. Both plot their mother's death, and both participate in it. Electra claims reponsibility in the lines "I urged you on, I urged you on,/ I touched the sword beside your hand" (ll. 1224-25). And although it is Orin's murder of Brant and his merciless announcement of it that resolve Christine to her suicide, it is Lavinia's decision not to stop her which sends her mother to her death.

Even in a minor, perhaps only coincidental detail, the two accounts resemble each other. In his reunion with his mother on returning from the war, Orin tenderly strokes his mother's hair and recalls his youth when he used to brush it for her. It is startling to encounter the same poignant detail in Orestes' account of his mother's murder and his own feelings of remorse: ". . . and her hair--

I touched it--" (l. 1209).

As noted in the section on Aeschylus, the most difficult element of the trilogies to reconcile is their diametrically opposed endings: the order- and life-affirming resolution of Orestes' guilt and the retreat from life and society implied by Lavinia's self-imposed life of seclusion.

The introduction of Euripides into the dilemma, however, brings into consideration the fates meted out to his two matricides. Orestes is promised happiness only when he has "drained the fullness of a murderer's doom" (l. 1290), and Electra is sentenced to lifelong exile from her homeland and separation from her brother. While the satisfying concreteness of textual parallels here is weakened, the "compelling doom" (l. 1301) of both Euripides and O'Neill which can only be expiated during the murderer's lifetime is surely much different from the neatly resolved legal case which Aeschylus employs to absolve the blood-guilt Orestes.

I have attempted to demonstrate, then, that O'Neill's vision of the story which he dramatizes is similar to that Euripides in a number of important ways. Both focus the drama on the Electra-figure whom they portray as austere and resolved; both make her motivations more complex than those of the simple "avenging-daughter" by emphasizing her uncommon attachment to her father; both develop her relationship with her mother as a long-standing antagonism; both make note of her hereditary ties with her father to the repudiation of those with her mother; both portray the brother as weak and vacillating, dependent upon the support and encouragement of the Electra-figure; both make the Electra-figure a participant in the crimes; and finally, both see expiation-over-time as the fate of their protagonists.

FOOTNOTES : CHAPTER THREE

[1] This precaution is suggested by Raymond Trousson, Un Problème de littérature comparée: Les études de thèmes (Paris: Lettres Modernes, 1965), pp. 56-57.

[2] "The Use of Classic Myth in Twentieth Century English and American Drama, 1900-1960" (Unpublished dissertation, Northwestern University, 1966), pp. 1-38.

[3] O'Neill's work diary reveals that he considered several names which resembled "Electra," before he decided to use "Lavinia" imitating the sound of Laodicea, the name Homer used for Electra in Book IX of the Iliad.

[4] "Working Notes," number 1, p. 530.

[5] This makes explicit a long series of suggestions of incestuous desires on the part of characters in the trilogy: Ezra's love for Christine because she resembles Marie Brantome who early replaced his own mother in his affections; Adam's love for Christine because of the same resemblance to his mother; Christine's love for Brant because he resembles her "lost" son, Orin; Orin's love for Christine and for Lavinia who comes to resemble her; Lavinia's love for Ezra and for Brant who resembles both her father and her brother.

[6] Rudolf Stamm, "The Orestes Theme in Three Plays by Eugene O'Neill, T.S. Eliot and Jean-Paul Sartre," English Studies XXX (1949), 245.

CHAPTER FOUR: CRITICAL COMMONPLACES

If the similarities between the Electra-plays of O'Neill and Euripides are as obvious as the argument of chapter three has suggested, one is tempted to conclude that the former's indebtedness to the latter must be a critical commonplace. A survey of the critical literature on Mourning Becomes Electra, however, reveals that this is not the case, and that with few exceptions, Aeschylus is named as O'Neill's source. Even critics who wish to deny this thesis, such as Horst Frenz and Martin Mueller are forced to begin with the acknowledgement that "There has been general critical agreement that Mourning Becomes Electra was modeled on the Oresteia."[1]

The secondary literature can be readily divided into six categories for examination and analysis. In the first such category, the writer mentions "Greek tragedy" or "Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides" as O'Neill's sources. In the second of the six categories, the commentator asserts that Aeschylus was O'Neill's model, but does not argue the case. This second category includes by far the largest number of critical essays to be examined. The third category of commentary, often cited by writers in the second, actually argues the case for the Oresteia as O'Neill's sole or primary source. The fourth category of essays includes those writers who acknowledge resemblances of the modern work to Euripides' Electra; the fifth category consisting of only one essay, presents an argument for O'Neill's use of Euripides. The sixth and final category includes writers from the preceding five who argue that whatever resemblances Mourning Becomes Electra can be shown to bear to any of the Greek dramatists, the play is fundamentally "non-Greek." It is this last category which, I think, best demonstrates the dangers of failing to recognize the very central role Euripides' work played in O'Neill's conception of his modern trilogy. Arguments of this last type fundamentally misunderstand either the scope of Greek tragedy or the spirit of O'Neill's play, or perhaps both.

Critics who credit "the Greeks" or name the three major Greek dramatists generally show little interest in the question of O'Neill's source. Their mention of the "Greeks" seems designed merely to alert the reader to the play's classical origins before pursuing a quite different thesis. George Jean Nathan, for example, describes the play as "an independent reworking in terms of modern characters and the modern psychology, of the Greek Orestes-Electra legend of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides."[2] Critic John Gassner remarks that O'Neill turned "to the Oresteian theme treated by Aeschylus and his successors,"[3] and Ricardo Doménech observes "Los personajes de O'Neill han sido comparados frecuentemente con los antiguos héroes de la tragedia griega."[4]

Although there are numerous examples of this kind of generalization,[5] they need not be included here, as they add little to a more precise determination of the sources of the modern work.

The second category, however, requires more extensive quotation in order to establish the pervasiveness of the view that Aeschylus was O'Neill's only or primary source. The entire issue of O'Neill's use of Euripides' Electra might seem a trivial one indeed if it weren't for the extent to which it has been ignored or overlooked in the secondary literature. Typical of the way in which the relationship is asserted are the following: "As the superimposed Greek title shows, the subject of the play is an old Greek myth presented in modern dress. And the trilogy, with its division into parts, acts and scenes, and the presence of a confidant and a chorus, looks like a transfer of Aeschylus' Oresteia"[6]; and "As taken from the Greek trilogy of Aeschylus, it embodies a common structural element that helps to illustrate the contrast between ancient and modern tragedy and to highlight the comparison of modern concepts of tragedy as expressed in other versions of the Oresteia"[7]; and "O'Neill set out to borrow both form and content from Aeschylus. . . . Mourning Becomes Electra follows the general outlines of the Aeschylean trilogy very closely."[8]

Many critics deal with the question in a mere phrase: "a modern retelling of the trilogy of Aeschylus"[9]; ". . . Lavinia, who corresponds to the Electra of Aeschylus"[10]; ". . . changes which O'Neill has imposed on the characters of Aeschylus . . ."[11]; "Perhaps the difference between Aeschylus and O'Neill . . ."[12]. Although these quotations are incomplete, all are taken from critical articles which mention only Aeschylus and illustrate, I think, the almost unquestioned authority the theory enjoys.

This commonplace is not only to be found among English-language scholars. Michel Zeraffa reports "Le modèle c'est l'Orestie d'Eschyle"[13]; Mario Parajón asserts "O'Neill ha escrito la contraparte de la 'Electra' de Esquilo"[14]; Françoise du Chaxel writes that "O'Neill a donc repris l'histoire des Atrides, telle que la conte Eschyle dans l'Orestie" and introduces a summary of each of the three plays in this way: "La première pièce Retour, qui correspond à l'Agamemnon d'Eschyle, . . . La deuxième pièce Traqués (Les Choèphores d'Eschyle) . . ." and "La troisième pièce Hantés (Les Euménides d'Eschyle)"[15].

A frequent variant of this pattern in the second category is ridicule or unfavourable criticism of O'Neill's work by contrast with that of Aeschylus. Thus, for example, Abraham Feldman begins his article entitled "The American Aeschylus?" by saying "U.S. literature contains no spectacle of loftier ambition and more lamentable failures than Eugene O'Neill's effort to create an American tragic trilogy paralleling the Oresteia of the greatest Greek dramatists [plural in original]. Mourning Becomes Electra (1931) is actually a grotesque parody of the Aeschylean plays concerning the family of Agamemnon. . . ."[16] Similarly, Leon Edel writes: "Modeling his story of the New England Mannons on the Oresteia of Aeschylus, O'Neill wrote a clever melodrama, pitched on a plane of high hysteria, in which murder engenders murder, and suicide, suicide."[17]

Classical scholar Gilbert Highet laments the resemblance, saying that Mourning Becomes Electra is "narrowed by a coarse insistence on the theme of sexual repression, and by the omission of the greater religious and moral problems faced by Aeschylus in the Oresteia."[18] And finally, with slightly less disapprobation, Clifford Leech remarks that "The characters stem from, on the one hand, the Oresteia of Aeschylus, and, on the other, any psychoanalyst's case-book."[19]

Although the foregoing account provides a fairly representative cross-section of those critics who assume, but do not argue O'Neill's dependence on the Oresteia, this category still contains numerous other examples.[20]

The most fully developed case for Aeschylus as O'Neill's source is the argument of critic Barrett Clark first published a year after the play's first production in New York.[21]

O'Neill had sent Clark a manuscript of the play before it was produced and they exchanged letters discussing it. While this might seem to lend more authority to Clark's argument, at least two caveats must be entered. First, it is clear from the answer which Quinn received to his inquiries, that the playwright believed Aeschylus the only one of his Greek models worthy of mention. Clark's observations on the modern trilogy are filtered through those of O'Neill himself, and thus subject to the same reservations about their detachment noted in chapter one. Secondly, the correspondence with O'Neill which Clark quotes in the article does not bear on O'Neill's classical sources at all, but rather, deals with his psychological sources.[22] The arguments advanced about O'Neill's use of the Greeks are all based on Clark's reading of the "Working Notes," and as noted in chapter two, the work diary makes no direct reference to any of the Greek tragedy writers.

Clark structures his case as a dichotomy: "Follow these [Working] notes, begun in 1926, and you will see that O'Neill soon made up his mind to use Aeschylus only when Aeschylus could help, and to fall back on O'Neill for the rest."[23]

He then proceeds to enumerate the characteristics of the modern play which he attributes to Aeschylus:

> It is likely that O'Neill turned to Aeschylus because the Greek had at hand a set of conventions that enabled him to present certain aspects of life that seemed important, without having to explain too much of the background or history of his characters. . . . so in Mourning Becomes Electra he utilized a ready-made story into all the details and motives and reasons of which it was not necessary to go.[24]

"You will, I believe, see much more of O'Neill in it," he also comments, "than Aeschylus; in spite of his deliberate use of the trilogy form and the fundamental similarity of the two stories, Electra remains a contemporary work."[25] Referring to O'Neill's attempt "to get modern psychological approximation of Greek sense of fate," Clark writes:

> After all, Aeschylus did write for an audience that must have accepted, even though as conventions, a set of more or less established moral, religious and political dogmas, and that being so, it was not necessary for him to answer such questions as any modern American audience must have answered before they are ready to accept the premise laid down in a play.[26]

His argument from this point takes the form of a plot and character comparison of the two works. Examples of the similarities to which he draws attention are: "just as Aeschylus could take for granted that his audience knew what the Trojan War was about, so O'Neill had only to suggest his time and place;"[27] "[t]he Agamemnon and Homecoming are concerned with situations fundamentally alike. In Aeschylus' play, Agamemnon returns. . . . In the O'Neill play, Ezra Mannon returns . . .;"[28] and

> Orin, being the weak, is the first to succumb. His case is complicated by a certain introspective malady that was unknown to or at least not touched upon by Aeschylus.
>
> At this point O'Neill declares his independence from the Greek model. Aeschylus carried him as far as was necessary.[29]

A number of objections must be raised to Clark's scholarship. The first is his assumption that Aeschylus held the Greek copyright to the Agamemnon-Electra story. The "copyright" suggestion is, of course, facetious, but it is clear that Clark was either unfamiliar with other ancient versions of the story or chose to ignore them. The similarities of "situation" are common to all treatments of the myth, and not unique to that of Aeschylus.

Secondly, O'Neill's diary note is vague when he determines that he "must follow Greek practice and make it a trilogy."[30] One must recall that the "practice" to which he refers is not the specific practice of dividing the Agamemnon story into a trilogy, as Aeschylus indeed had done, but the more generalized practice enforced by the custom of the Dionysian dramatic competitions that a playwright enter a full day's schedule--usually three tragedies and a satyr play--which could be, but were not required to be, related to one another.

A third objection I would enter is that Clark is simply wrong when he makes reference to "a certain introspective malady that was unknown to or at least not touched upon by Aeschylus" as being unique to O'Neill's Orin. Both Aeschylus and Euripides make it clear that the Furies are not visible to other characters in the play, and are taken to be symptoms of madness in Orestes. In _The Libation Bearers_, Aeschylus' chorus asks "Orestes, dearest to your father of all men/ what fancies whirl you? . . . [what] makes this shaken turbulence be thrown upon your sense [?]" (ll. 1051-52 and ll. 1055-56); in Euripides, the Dioscuri predict "The dreadful beast-faced goddesses of destiny/ will roll you like a wheel through maddened wandering," (ll. 1252-53) and describe "their ghostly tracking against you" (l. 1344). Though the symptoms described may differ slightly, modern writers do not, as Clark intimates, have a monopoly on madness or its portrayal, much less did they invent it.[31]

A fourth objection is the way differences between Aeschylus and O'Neill are explained. By assuming a dichotomy, that is, "anything which cannot be traced back to Aeschylus must be original to O'Neill," Clark has enormously simplified the task of analysis, but has betrayed sound scholarship in the process. I will note only one example of this simplification, but one which I think is central to the Aeschylus/Euripides question. The example is O'Neill's departure from the practice of Aeschylus in giving the major role in the tragedy to Lavinia. Because its logic seems specious, I can only quote without elaboration his explanation and leave other readers to draw their own conclusion as to its soundness.

> The fact that Clytemnestra was jealous of Cassandra is of little importance, and the sacrifice of Iphigenia--for O'Neill's purpose--is just as irrelevant. So, instead of making Orestes the chief instrument of vengeance, as Aeschylus did in the second part of his trilogy, he at once gave to Lavinia the dramatic functions of the prophetess, the avenger Orestes, and the choruses.[32]

Such a critical examination of Clark's quite naive argument seems unwarranted, perhaps, until one realizes that this is the first lengthy article published about O'Neill's source[33] and is still the most frequently cited reference on the question.

Not all critics, however, have overlooked the similarities between Mourning Becomes Electra and Euripides' Electra. As in the case of Aeschylus, those who posit similarities between O'Neill and Euripides can be subdivided into two categories: those who refer to Euripides only in passing (category four) and those who systematically argue the case for Euripides (category five). Again, the critical literature of the latter category consists of one article.

Most typical of the references which fall into category four are the following: "First, O'Neill felt that Electra, as developed by Aeschylus and Euripides, was slighted of her inherent tragic possibilities . . .;"[34] O'Neill's immediate interest [is] in Electra (there is more of Euripides than of Aeschylus here) . . .;"[35] and, O'Neill "carried the story beyond the Greek denouement . . . beyond the ending of Euripides."[36]

A few commentators, however, consider the role of Euripides more seriously. Edwin Engle focuses on the work diary entry in which O'Neill protested that the tragic potential of Electra's character was not fully explored by the Greek dramatists:

> Euripides, he thought, had permitted Electra to escape with a relatively light penalty—compared with Orestes—by giving her in marriage to Pylades, the brother's friend. He was convinced that this was an unworthy ending for such a tragic figure. . . . When O'Neill refused to permit Lavinia to marry Peter, he was correcting what he felt to be a fault in the Electra of Euripides.[37]

Thomas Porter's discussion of Euripides' role is interesting in a number of ways. First, the entire discussion is conducted in a footnote, albeit a long footnote. Secondly, Porter's exposition is interesting because he very meticulously notes and emphasizes the many dissimilarities between O'Neill's play and that of Aeschylus, admits to similarities with Euripides' Electra, and then, with no further explanation, concludes that Aeschylus was the more important of the two possible sources:

> In his depiction of Electra, O'Neill departs from Aeschylus. In the Oresteia Electra plays a subordinate role. She functions as surrogate to Agamemnon; as her visit to her father's tomb opens The Choephori, she is immediately identified with his cause. She also serves to introduce Orestes by lamenting his absence and recognizing him on his appearance. Lavinia, on the other hand, appears in the first scene of Homecoming. She has previous knowledge of her mother's infidelity; she attempts to warn her father of his danger; she discovers evidence, immediately after Ezra's death, of Christine's treachery. Apropos of the title, Lavinia assumes the role of heroine in Mourning. O'Neill has a precedent for her centrality from Euripides' version of the legend. His notes indicate that he also made use of

> that play. But the main outlines of Mourning follow Aeschylus.[38]

A final example from this category is provided in a 1932 article by Frances Knickerbocker. Although this article too, concludes that Aeschylus provides "the closest parallel" to O'Neill's play,[39] it makes very accurate observations about the similarities of characterization between O'Neill and Euripides:

> The Orestes of Aeschylus and of Sophocles kills his mother relentlessly; "in justice did I slay this woman," he exults. Only Euripides makes him shrink and when, goaded by Electra, he has struck the blow, it overwhelms them both with pity . . . In character she [Lavinia] is strikingly like that strange modern Electra of Euripides, the wasted woman with her "bitter burning brain" . . . But even the Electra of Euripides goes, "soft-eyed at last," to wed Pylades. . . . It is the first, the only surviving trilogy of Greek drama, that gives the closest parallel.[40]

I would only dispute Knickerbocker's description of Electra's fate as going "'soft-eyed at last'" in marrying Pylades. Her fate is decreed (or predicted) by the Dioscuri and she protests it bitterly: "Are there more poignant sorrows or greater/ than leaving the soil of a fatherland? . . . dear Brother[,] I love you./ But the curses bred in a mother's blood/ dissolve our bonds and drive us from home. . . . I go. These tears are harsh for my eyes" (ll. 1313-15, 1322-24, and 1339). Such pleas hardly indicate a "happily-ever-after" ending as implied by Knickerbocker.

The most detailed argument for Euripides' inspiration of major features of Mourning Becomes Electra is that of S. Nagarajan. Noting that "It is naive and misleading to cite parallelism of event," in constructing a case, he devotes two lengthy paragraphs of character analysis to his comparison. In the first he comments:

> In fine, it seems to me that there is no essential correspondence between the Oresteian trilogy and Mourning Becomes Electra . . . There is however another Greek play which is somewhat closer to O'Neill than the Oresteia. That enfant terrible of the Greek stage, Euripides, wrote a melodrama called Electra in which he turned Electra into a 'middle-age virago.'[41]

This comparison is followed by several pages of summary of the two works including quotation from each. From the two summaries he concludes:

> Between Euripides and O'Neill, there are of course important differences, the chief of them being perhaps the different conclusions and the clearer and more organic impression that the Euripidean play leaves. But there is some clear resemblance in the characterization of Lavinia and Electra, and Orin and Orestes. Both women have the same relentless nature, the same single-track mind. They have no life in them except their thirst for revenge; in Euripides, there is also a hint that Electra suffers from sexual unfulfilment. Electra has been aptly described as 'an entirely private and personal assemblage of faults with no universal significance', a Medea without the tragedy--but with all Medea's Grand Guignol effects; in other words, a heroine of melodrama. The description fits O'Neill's Lavinia also. Euripides' Orestes and O'Neill's Orin also have some common characteristics: a love of the mother turning to hatred (though it is primarily jealousy of her [sic] mother's lover, not affection for the father, that is the cause of Orin's hatred), and hatred turning to remorse as soon as the mother is dead. The brothers in both the plays have no will of their own and have to be goaded on by their sisters to take revenge on the mother. Finally, Euripides,[comma in original] aim was to produce a theatrical thrill, and little else. Though O'Neill was after something 'big,' as he called it, his trilogy will also survive as a powerful melodrama containing an impressive study of abnormal psychology.[42]

Disregarding the gratuitous aesthetic judgments of the two works by Nagarajan, I think this comparison the most perceptive and thorough to be found in the secondary literature on O'Neill's work. Its weakness is in its failure to consider the external as well as internal evidence; nowhere does the author acknowledge O'Neill's statement about his sources, or even allude to the other important resource, O'Neill's work diary. Whereas the critics who trace their scholarly lineage from Clark neglect to look beyond O'Neill's imitation of the trilogy form and are content to take the author's (or Clark's) assurance that Aeschylus was the model, Nagarajan errs in the opposite direction by failing to account for the known biographical facts. Even if one only concludes that O'Neill's statement should be viewed with considerable skepticism, as I suggested in chapter one, it is nevertheless important to consider all of the evidence available before closing discussion.

The sixth and final category into which commentary on these three works and their possible relationships can be divided, draws examples from most of the preceding categories. It is composed of those writers who contend that O'Neill's play is either "non-Aeschylean," or more significantly, "non-Greek." The issue is dealt with separately here because the argument is not advanced only by proponents of one or the other possible sources, and because it bears on the questions to be considered in chapter five. Again, extensive quotation is necessary to reflect accurately the pervasiveness of these arguments in the body of the secondary literature.

Stark Young in his review of the play, remarks that "The story itself follows the Greeks up to the middle of the third division of the play, and here the incest motive, the death of Orin and the transference of the whole situation and dramatic conclusion from the mother to the sister depart from Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides."[43] Revealing a less than perfect knowledge of extant Greek tragedy, Corbin observes that "In 'Mourning Becomes Electra' very little is to be found of either Aeschylus or Sophocles, except indeed the great length of their trilogies. . . . It is the curse, the primal curse of Erynnies [Erinyes] who refuse to become Eumenides."[44]

Clifford Leech again focuses on The Haunted as the point at which O'Neill abandons the model of Aeschylus:

> In the third play there is a major departure from Aeschylus. Both dramatists at the beginning show a tormented figure in Orestes and Orin: in Aeschylus this play is called The Eumenides, in O'Neill The Haunted. But the Greek dramatist turned away from tragedy half-way through the play Orestes was shown petitioning for mercy from the court of the Areopagus, under the presidency of Athene herself.[45]

Warren Ramsey makes much the same point when he writes:

> Only at the end of Mourning Becomes Electra can the major departure from the Aeschylean plot, and the title of this play be fully appreciated. . . . O'Neill's refusal of so much as an Aeschylean tempering of justice tends to make his play a study of interlocked situations rather than a changing, evolving organism.[46]

Both Carpenter and J.P. O'Neill follow Clark in attributing the differences between the two writers to the requirements of "modern-ness" in Mourning Becomes Electra. The former writes "In the first two, O'Neill consciously translated classical myths into modern psychological terms, in the third, he created his own myth. The first two follow the Greek pattern more closely, whereas the third departs from it to describe a more modern 'Electra.'"[47] The latter critic maintains:

> While O'Neill follows the basic structural outline of the Greek trilogy in his first two plays, "Homecoming," and "The Haunted," he radically changes the final play, "The Haunted." According to Barrett Clark, where Aeschylus degenerates into writing a political defense of the Athenian court in his "Eumenides," O'Neill alters the plot of "The Haunted" and pursues the logical consequences postulated by the incidents of the trilogy itself. . . . The necessity to adapt ancient values to modern circumstances, and to translate Greek notions of an external fate into terms of modern psychology, explains the radical changes from the original in O'Neill's final play . . .[48]

Porter's analysis of the "non-Greek" aspects of Mourning Becomes Electra is more significant than those of other critics, perhaps, because he is one of the few critics who both acknowledge the weaknesses of the case for Aeschylus and admit to an awareness of similarities with Euripides. Yet, Porter writes:

> The plot of Mourning Becomes Electra is remarkably faithful to the Oresteia. Its characterization, symbolism and tone, however, are determined by O'Neill's interpretation of the Puritan heritage, by Freudian psychology and by the corollary motif of salvation by spatial remove. The effect of these non-Hellenic elements is a shift of focus so radical as to produce a complete inversion of the play's meaning.[49]

The strongest adherents to this position are Frenz and Mueller. They are obliged to argue the "non-Greek-ness" of O'Neill's work in order to advance their own thesis that Shakespeare's Hamlet rather than Aeschylus' Oresteia inspired O'Neill's work, and their position is strongly stated, indeed:

> It is simply not true that O'Neill, as he said himself, psychologized Greek fate. For the "fate" that O'Neill considers so typical of Greek tragedy does not exist. There is no evidence that O'Neill's approach to Greek drama ever freed itself from the critical prejudices that persist even to this day; he saw Greek tragedy through the spectacles of a popular determinism. There is nothing in Mourning Becomes Electra which would suggest that O'Neill ever had an original experience of Greek drama in general, or of the Oresteia in particular. No doubt he knew Aeschylus's trilogy well, but he must have read it with a notion, at once very strong and rather vague, of what a Greek tragedy ought to be like. He never penetrated to the Greekness of it; nor was he inspired by it. O'Neill's trilogy is no more Greek than the house of the Mannons; it only has a Greek facade.[50]

The feature common to nearly all of the arguments in this, the sixth and final category, is that the question is conceived as a dichotomy between the influence of Aeschylus and the originality of O'Neill. In the few exceptions to this generalization, such as Frenz and Mueller, a third term is added to this equation, but it is still presented as exclusive of all others.

There is general agreement that O'Neill's work, particularly the third play in the trilogy, is very different from that of Aeschylus. The question remains, however, whether those "non-Hellenic" elements are truly foreign to Greek tragedy, or whether O'Neill's use of them derives from the practice of another Hellene, Euripides. This is the concern of the fifth and final chapter of the thesis.

FOOTNOTES : CHAPTER FOUR

[1] "More Shakespeare and Less Aeschylus in Eugene O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra*," *American Literature*, XXXVIII (1966), p. 85.

[2] "Our Premier Dramatist," from *Intimate Notebooks*, 1932; reprinted in Oscar Cargill, N. Bryllion Fagin and William J. Fisher, eds. *O'Neill and His Plays: Four Decades of Criticism* (New York: New York University Press, 1961), p. 290.

[3] *Eugene O'Neill* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1965), p. 30.

[4] "Eugene O'Neill y su 'Electra'," *Cuadernos Hispano-Americanos* CXCIII (January, 1966), p. 149.

[5] See, among others, W. Ernest Vincent, "Five Electras--Aeschylus to Sartre," *Southern Speech Journal* XXIV (1959), p. 231; Richard Dana Skinner, *Eugene O'Neill: A Poet's Quest* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1935; rpt. 1964), p. 212; Brooks Atkinson, New York *Times* review of 27 October 1931, in Jordan Y. Miller, ed. *Playwright's Progress: O'Neill and the Critics* (Chicago: Scott, Foresman, 1965), p. 65.

[6] Roger Asselineau, "*Mourning Becomes Electra* as a Tragedy," *Modern Drama* I (December, 1958), p. 143.

[7] Joseph P. O'Neill, "The Tragic Theory of Eugene O'Neill," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* IV (Spring, 1962), p. 482.

[8] Thomas E. Porter, *Myth and Modern American Drama* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1969), pp. 28 and 31.

[9] Allan Lewis, *American Plays and Playwrights of the Contemporary Theatre* (New York: Brown Publishers, 1965), p. 16.

[10] Clifford Leech, *O'Neill* (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1963), p. 86.

[11] Gilbert Norwood, "The Art of Eugene O'Neill," *Dalhousie Review* XXI, p. 156.

[12] Joseph Wood Krutch, *The American Drama Since 1918* (New York: George Braziller, 1957), p. 110.

[13] *Eugène O'Neill: Dramaturge* (Paris: L'Arche, 1956), p. 124.

[14] *El Teatro de O'Neill* (La Habana: Orígenes, 1952), p. 109.

[15] *O'Neill* (Paris: Éditions Seghers, 1971), pp. 90 and 92.

[16] *Poet Lore* LII (1946), p. 149.

[17] "Eugene O'Neill: The Face and the Mask," *University of Toronto Quarterly* VII (October, 1937), p. 32.

[18] *The Classical Tradition: Greek and Roman Influences on Western Literature* (London: Oxford University Press, 1949), p. 526.

[19] "Eugene O'Neill and His Plays," *Critical Quarterly* III (1961), p. 252.

[20] See, as further examples, Hugh Dickinson, *Myth on the Modern Stage* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1969), pp. 146, 148, 153, 176 and 179; John Corbin, "O'Neill and Aeschylus," *Saturday Review of Literature* VIII (April 30, 1932), pp. 694-95, and John Mason Brown, New York *Post* review of 27.10.1931, reprinted in Miller, ed., *Playwright's Progress*, pp. 68-69.

[21] "Aeschylus and O'Neill," *The English Journal* XXI (November, 1932); reprinted almost verbatim as a chapter of his *Eugene O'Neill: The Man and His Plays* (New York: Dover Publications), pp. 122-137.

[22] "Aeschylus and O'Neill," p. 709.

[23] *Ibid.*, p. 702.

[24] *Ibid.*, pp. 701-702.

[25] *Ibid.*, p. 700.

[26] *Ibid.*, p. 702.

[27] *Ibid.*

[28] *Ibid.*, p. 703.

[29] *Ibid.*, p. 705.

[30] "Working Notes," number 8, p. 532.

[31] The same mistake is made by Frederic Carpenter in *Eugene O'Neill* (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1964), p. 130: "Nevertheless, in the case of Orin (Orestes), 'the furies' which were externalized in the Greek myth, now have been realized more dramatically in the tortured conscience of the modern 'hero' and the psychological confusions of his mind."

[32] "Aeschylus and O'Neill," p. 703.

[33] Corbin's *Saturday Review* article preceded it by six months, but while Corbin considers the question of O'Neill's source, his object is to deprecate O'Neill's work by comparison with Aeschylus, and he does not attempt a systematic examination of the similarities or differences.

[34] J.P. O'Neill, p. 490.

[35] Walter Prichard Eaton, "O'Neill--'New Risen Attic Stream'?" The American Scholar VI (1937), p. 310.

[36] W. David Sievers, Freud on Broadway: A History of Psychoanalysis and the American Drama (New York: Hermitage House, 1956), p. 121.

[37] The Haunted Heroes of Eugene O'Neill (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1953), pp. 255-56.

[38] Myth and Modern American Drama, n. 12, p. 260.

[39] "A New England House of Atreus," Sewanee Review XL (1932), p. 249.

[40] Knickerbocker, pp. 252 and 249.

[41] "Eugene O'Neill's 'Mourning Becomes Electra'; The Classical Aspect," The Literary Criterion (Mysore) V (1962), pp. 150-51.

[42] Nagarajan, p. 154.

[43] "Eugene O'Neill's New Play," rpt. from New Republic (November, 1931) in Immortal Shadows (New York: Scribner's, 1948), p. 133.

[44] Corbin, p. 695.

[45] "Eugene O'Neill and His Plays," p. 253.

[46] "The Oresteia since Hofmannsthal: Images and Emphases," Revue de Littérature Comparée XXXVIII (1964), pp. 364-65.

[47] p. 129.

[48] pp. 486, 489.

[49] p. 49.

[50] p. 100.

CHAPTER FIVE: IMPLICATIONS FOR SCHOLARSHIP

The common failing, if so strong a word is appropriate, of the critical works examined in chapter four, is their attempt to reduce the complexity of the source question to dichotomies. In doing so, they have ignored that "complexity in the creative process" which Hassan[1] and other theorists of source and influence study demand be respected.

Without denying that other writers and works may have been a part of the creative complexity from which the play resulted, I am strongly convinced that Euripides played a significant role in the inspiration of Mourning Becomes Electra. My concluding chapter argues this position in the confidence that it will not appear the weaker for eschewing the all-or-nothing rhetoric of other critics.

That caution having been noted, however, this chapter will attempt to deal with the arguments such as that of Frenz and Mueller that the modern play is "non-Greek." To do so, it will be necessary to explore parallels between Euripides' practice of the art of tragedy, and that of O'Neill, and further, though somewhat cursorily, to look at the place of Euripides in the Greek tragic tradition.

The most often cited difference between the modern work and that of "the Greeks," is O'Neill's introduction of modern psychology into his trilogy.[2] O'Neill's use of concepts from psychology in his works is well-documented,[3] but is such borrowing exclusively modern? O'Neill himself argued that it was not. In response to a question from Clark he said: "Authors were psychologists, you know, and profound ones, before psychology was invented."[4]

But more to the point at hand is the commentary of Greek scholars about the use of psychology by Euripides. Edith Hamilton, for example, writes of his "modernity" in her chapter "Euripides: The Modern Mind":

> When Professor [Gilbert] Murray's translations made Euripides popular in the early years of this century, what impressed people first of all was his astonishing modernity: he seemed to be speaking the very accent of 1900.[5]

Murray himself, calling Euripides "the most problematic figure in ancient literature,"[6] and "a merciless realist,"[7] noted in particular the "subtle type [of realism] we find in the Electra."[8] Elsewhere he pinpoints the source of the realism in Euripides' work by terming it "psychological realism of the subtlest kind,"[9] which he explains by saying: "His actors are not clear-minded heroes moving straight to their purpose. They are human creatures, erring, broken by passion, mastered by their own inhibitions and doubts and regrets."[10]

Victor Hanzeli focuses specifically on Euripides' Electra:

> Euripides places strong emphasis on the development of hatred within Electra, a hatred growing from her reaction to her degradation and her exile from her father's house to a peasant's hut. . . . With Euripides the psychological motivation adds a new element: tragedy resulting from human passion now runs parallel with the earlier supernatural motivation but by no means diminishes the importance of the latter.[11]

In light of the widely-held view that Euripides was a "psychological" writer, claims like those of J.P. O'Neill that the modern playwright made "radical changes from the original" because of the necessity "to translate Greek notions of an external fate into terms of modern psychology"[12] seem naive indeed. Porter's argument that the "non-Hellenic" use of Freudian psychology results in "a shift of focus so radical as to produce a complete inversion of the play's meaning,"[13] is not only naive, but entirely neglects the largest body of extant Hellenic drama, the works of Euripides.

A second claim made against the "authenticity" of O'Neill's reworking of the Greek story, is the objection of Frenz and Mueller that O'Neill in attempting to "psychologize Greek fate" had "never penetrated to the Greekness of it," and had instead, merely mirrored "popular determinism." The concept of "Greekness" will be discussed presently, but for the moment, the Frenz-Mueller claims about O'Neill's practice and about Greek notions of fate bear further examination.

If these two authors understand all psychological exploration of character as "deterministic," then there would be no issue at stake, but their use of the word would be most peculiar. If, however, they mean that the psychology of the characters in Mourning Becomes Electra makes of them pre-programmed automatons, I think that they are simply wrong. O'Neill demonstrated in The Emperor Jones and The Hairy Ape that he could create unreflective characters whose actions were inextricably bound to pre-determined psychological patterns. The motivations of his Yank Smith or his Brutus Jones are so much simpler than those of Lavinia or Orin or Christine as to result in a qualitative change in the complexity of their actions. The Mannons act not merely on instinct, but with reflection; they hesitate, as Brant did in accepting Christine's murder plan, or Lavinia in allowing her mother's suicide; they are torn in choosing between alternative courses of action, they are not unidimensional in the way that Smith and Jones are.

Some difficulty is occasioned here by O'Neill's discussion of his work, as, for example, a number of entries in the work diary. If Frenz and Mueller had only that evidence, they might call the work deterministic with more justification, for it is true that in talking about his uses of psychology, O'Neill often slips into the popular psychological vocabulary of his contemporaries. O'Neill is a better dramatist than theoretician of the drama, and a more skillful observer of man's behaviour than he is a theoretical psychologist, and thus, it is his dramatic work which should be considered before all else. In comparing the characters of Mourning Becomes Electra with those of his earlier plays like The Emperor Jones, it becomes clear that O'Neill is capable of depicting a wide range of character types, and that his modern Greeks are hardly encompassed in the simplistic concept of "popular determinism."

But did the Greek notion of fate stop at the manipulations of the residents of Olympus, excluding the inner motivations of mere mortals? Hanzeli (see note five above) described Euripides as using both human passions and the supernatural as motivations for his characters. The role of destiny is better characterized for all of the major Greek tragedians by F.L. Lucas when he writes: "The persons of Aeschylus are Titanic, those of Sophocles, heroically ideal; but a subtler psychology, the staging of the struggle, not between man and destiny, but between passion and passion in the soul, begins with Euripides."[14] The struggle "between passion and passion in the soul" surely describes O'Neill's concept of destiny in Mourning Becomes Electra as accurately as it does that of Euripides.

Next the claims from chapter four which praise or protest O'Neill's departure from the third play of Aeschylus' trilogy, those which characterize this departure as "non-Greek," and in particular, the claim by Frenz and Mueller that O'Neill never had "an original experience of Greek drama" demand some scrutiny. All of these arguments, I maintain, spring from the too widely-held misconception of Greek drama which began with Aristotle. By pointing to the controlled, Olympian, "heroically ideal" tragedy of Sophocles as the model for tragedy, Aristotle begat a long line of critical successors who equivocate on the notion of the "norm." Sophoclean tragedy came to be seen not only as the ideal, but also as the typical Greek tragedy. The use of "Greekness" as a criterion of value in the context of these arguments is in most cases purely honorific, or its opposite. If the play can be shown to be "Greek" it is beyond question good, if not, it is the worse for its pretension. Yet an understanding of the diversity of Greek tragedy is necessary for a fuller appreciation of how mistaken such arguments are when they are not merely vacuous.

The popular view of Greek drama as a high and solemn religious experience is rooted in the drama of Aeschylus, and, while less specifically religious, the highly ethical works of Sophocles. Norwood argues, however, that it is hazardous to generalize Aeschylus' vision of tragedy to all of Greek classical tragedy: "Aeschylus, to be sure, composed religious dramas, but only because he happened to be, in the fullest possible sense, a religious genius. . . ."[15] Norwood quotes Sophocles himself as having characterized the differences between his works and those of Euripides. He is said to have remarked: "I depict people as they ought to be; Euripides depicts them as they are."[16] The contrast of Euripides' work with that of both of his predecessors, however, is best made by William Arrowsmith in commenting on the Orestes of Euripides:

> . . . so long as the standard image of the Greek play remains that of the tense and archaic ordered calm and balanced harmony of Sophoclean folklore, a play of 'howling spiritual lunacy' like the Orestes must appear an unwelcome and unsettling freak.[17]

The Frenz-Mueller argument, to be defended at all, would have to define quintessential "Greekness." This, as Norwood observes, is an empty exercise: "Nor need we bemuse ourselves with that phantom 'the spirit of the age.' There is no spirit of an age apart from the great souls . . . that give the age its meaning and vigour."[18] While it is true that Euripides produced in Greek drama a "profound change of spirit,"[19] his work is nevertheless very much a part of the Greek dramatic tradition. With nineteen Euripidean dramas extant, compared to seven of Aeschylus and seven of Sophocles, the identification of Greek drama with only the works of either of Euripides' predecessors is open to suspicion as a wilfull distortion.

Three other characteristics of the dramatists' works strengthen the comparisons which can be made between O'Neill and Euripides, but are not recognized by those critics who argue against Greek inspiration of the former's trilogy.

The first of these similarities is the experimental nature of their work. It is curious to note that in an article specifically on O'Neill, Gilbert Norwood argues the case for Aeschylus' influence on Mourning Becomes Electra.[20] Yet in his book on Euripides, it is O'Neill who springs to mind for comparison:

> This fluctuation [of quality] appears most notably in Euripides because he was an untiring experimenter--like Mr. Eugene O'Neill, who, although the most consummate

> playwright of his time, has been content to produce such a crude fantasy as Strange Interlude or that bad piece The Iceman Cometh, because he insists on exploring the possibilities of his art instead of imitating his own magnificent Mourning Becomes Electra . . .[21]

A second similarity is O'Neill's use of anachronism, his willingness to transpose the traditional myth into the modern or near modern world. Though it is hardly apparent to the modern reader, Arrowsmith notes the same tendency in Euripides: "In play after play, . . . Euripides uproots a myth from the cultural context of a remote and different world, thereby altering its motives, its characters, and its meaning."[22]

The final similarity, while not so direct as the preceding two, nevertheless has some cogency in explaining a characteristic of Mourning Becomes Electra which is central to the case for Hamlet made by Frenz and Mueller. The critics maintain that many resemblances between the works by Shakespeare and O'Neill arise from a necessity to conceal the family crimes, enabling "the family drama to unfold free from outside interference."[23] O'Neill had in fact remarked in his work-diary on the difficulty of constructing a plot within this constraint.[24] In making this undeniably astute observation, these critics focus on the murder of the king and the secrecy surrounding it in both Hamlet and O'Neill's work. I found this argument persuasive but not pertinent to most of O'Neill's trilogy, for, as the authors acknowledge, "The death of the father is only one episode in an Electra drama."[25]

Only with the discovery of a more illuminating analysis of differences between two works, the Oresteia of Aeschylus and the Electra of Euripides, did I become convinced that the matter of secrecy is only superficially important to O'Neill's work, and that it differs from the Oresteia in the same way H.D.F. Kitto suggests that Euripides' work does:

> Aeschylus assumes that no system of public justice exists, because his real drama is the development of the moral order which results in its establishment. . . . but in the Electra . . . nothing whatever is said about the possibility of bringing Clytemnestra to judgment. The explanation of this difference is, naturally, purely dramatic . . . The existence of public justice would have blurred the sharpness of the situation, as in the Medea it would have weakened and dissipated the drama to suggest that Medea could have sought legal redress for her wrongs. In each play the conception demands a terrifying character in an absolute situation.[26]

O'Neill's differences from Aeschylus are the result of no mere plotter's trick of whether or not to reveal responsibility for a murder, but rather, a fundamentally different conception of what his drama was about. Kitto's argument can be extended to include O'Neill's Electra drama simply by conceptualizing his play as it would have been constructed were it, like the Oresteia, to have focused on the "development of the moral order," rather than on the "terrifying character" of Lavinia in an "absolute situation."

No doubt this distinction between public and private justice is also operative in Hamlet and many other works which seek to portray the development of character in extreme situations, but the comparison with Hamlet is a specious one when the more probable link with Euripides can be established.

Thus, I have attempted to demonstrate in this chapter that beyond specific comparisons of Euripides' Electra and O'Neill's trilogy there exist more generalized similarities of their entire dramatic outlook. Those critics who fail to recognize these similarities often fall into facile labeling of O'Neill's work as "non-Greek."

FOOTNOTES : CHAPTER FIVE

[1] p. 69.

[2] See, e.g., the discussions of Carpenter, J.P. O'Neill, and Porter in chapter four above.

[3] See, e.g., Sparrow and Nethercot.

[4] "Aeschylus and O'Neill," p. 709.

[5] The Great Age of Greek Literature (New York: Norton, 1942), p. 272.

[6] A History of Ancient Greek Literature (New York: Appleton, 1908), p. 250.

[7] *Ibid.*, p. 273.

[8] *Ibid.*, p. 260.

[9] Euripides and His Age (London: Williams & Norgate, n.d.), p. 154.

[10] *Ibid.*, p. 155.

[11] "The Progeny of Atreus," Modern Drama III (May, 1960), p. 76.

[12] p. 489.

[13] p. 49.

[14] Euripides and His Influence (New York: Cooper Square Publishers, 1963), p. 22.

[15] Essays on Euripidean Drama (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1954), p. 8.

[16] The Writers of Greece (London: Oxford University Press, 1925), p. 66.

[17] "Introduction to Orestes," in Euripides IV ed. David Grene and Richmond Lattimore (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), p. 106.

[18] Essays, p. 8.

[19] Norwood, Writers, p. 65.

[20] "The Art of Eugene O'Neill," *passim*.

[21] Essays, pp. 11-12.

[22] p. 107.

[23] Frenz and Mueller, p. 85.

[24] "Working Notes," number 11, p. 532.

[25] p. 86.

[26] *Greek Tragedy: A Literary Study* (London: Methuen, 1939), pp. 33-34.

CONCLUSION

> I don't know any better Method of improving the Taste, than to compare the Productions of such great Genius's as have exercised their Talent on the same Subject.
>
> Voltaire[1]

A great many critical articles have been written on Eugene O'Neill's debt to two Greek dramatists, Aeschylus and Euripides. This thesis has argued that most have been far too facile and superficial in their analyses. Using the traditional research methods of literary history and more recently-developed techniques of internal analysis, I have examined the evidence for O'Neill's use of Aeschylus and Euripides and concluded that the latter was the more important source for O'Neill's reworking of the Electra myth.

In chapter one, I considered the current controversy over the concepts of source- and influence-study, and while acknowledging the importance of the synchronic study of literary types, I maintain that there is still a significant role for diachronic source-studies in literary scholarship. Chapter one also discussed the problem of what authority should be accorded to an author's statement about his sources, concluding that particularly in the case of O'Neill's remark about his use of the Greeks in Mourning Becomes Electra, this evidence should be weighed against all other evidence available.

Chapter two dealt with the evidence available from O'Neill's biography. The little published information about his knowledge of the Greeks reveals that although he often remarked on his extensive readings in Greek literature, few specific works are known to have been read by him; he almost certainly did not read in the original

Greek, and his attitude toward Greek tragedy was that of an enthusiast rather than that of a scholar. The published fragments from his working notes strongly indicate that he had read Euripides Medea and probably his Electra.

In chapter three, the internal evidence was examined. A great many features of the work were found to be common to all extant treatments of the myth. Several characteristics of the modern work are undeniably found only in the Oresteia of Aeschylus. But the comparisons made with Euripides' Electra make the stronger case. Those similarities include: the focus of each on the character of Electra, the details of appearance both dramatists assign to her, her very strong attachment to her father, and later to her brother, her uncompromising hatred of her mother which in both plays predates the murder of Agamemnon, the repudiation of her hereditary ties with her mother. Both Euripides and O'Neill portray the Orestes-figure as hesitant, dependent on support from the sister; both give Electra equal responsibility with him for the murders, and both end their plays on notes of despair rather than affirmation.

The critical commonplace that Aeschylus was O'Neill's only or primary source is examined in chapter four. Critics who make this argument either naively assume that the Electra story originated with Aeschylus or argue from the authority of Barrett Clark's case, which is shown to be equally naive. The few critical articles which note O'Neill's possible use of Euripides are also examined, the weakness of most being their unwillingness to challenge the more commonly-held belief in the influence of Aeschylus. The one critic who does attempt a systematic comparison between the Electra-plays of O'Neill and

Euripides, S. Nagarajan, overlooks a number of important similarities and fails to make any reference to the available external evidence. The last type of critical commentary taken to task in chapter four consists of critics who argue that O'Neill's play is not "Greek" in inspiration. The weakness of these arguments is that, in assuming the question of source to be a dichotomy between O'Neill's originality and his borrowings from Aeschylus, they identify all of Greek drama with the works of Aeschylus, ignoring the fact that the latter was not the only Greek dramatist, nor the only one to have used the Electra myth.

Chapter five suggested that beyond the specific plays examined in the preceding four chapters, there are notable similarities between the concept of drama of both Euripides and O'Neill: both were realists with profound interest in human psychology, both eschewed the austere, controlled Sophoclean tragedy idealized by Aristotle, both were experimental, and both chose to transpose traditional stories into modern settings. Finally, both constructed their Electra tragedy around the quest for private rather than public justice.

Despite almost unanimous critical agreement on Aeschylus as Eugene O'Neill's source for Mourning Becomes Electra, the arguments comparing it with the Oresteia have been shown to be extremely weak. By contrast, the case for some influence from Euripides' Electra has been shown to be surprisingly strong, despite the little credit it has been given by scholars. An awareness of this relationship is essential both to an understanding of the art of Euripides, and to that of O'Neill.

FOOTNOTE : CONCLUSION

[1] "Letter XXI. on the Earl of Rochester and Mr. Waller," Letters Concerning the English Nation, 1773; rpt. (London: Peter Davies, 1926), pp. 147-48.

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